A MARVEL MAGAZINE/APRIL 1981 / 75p

epic ILLUSTRATED™

Anniversary issue

beginning our second year of adult fantasy and science-fiction

featuring an exclusive interview with The Brothers Hildebrandt

epic ILLUSTRATED

APRIL 1981 VOL. 1, NO. 5

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Cover/The Brothers Hildebrandt

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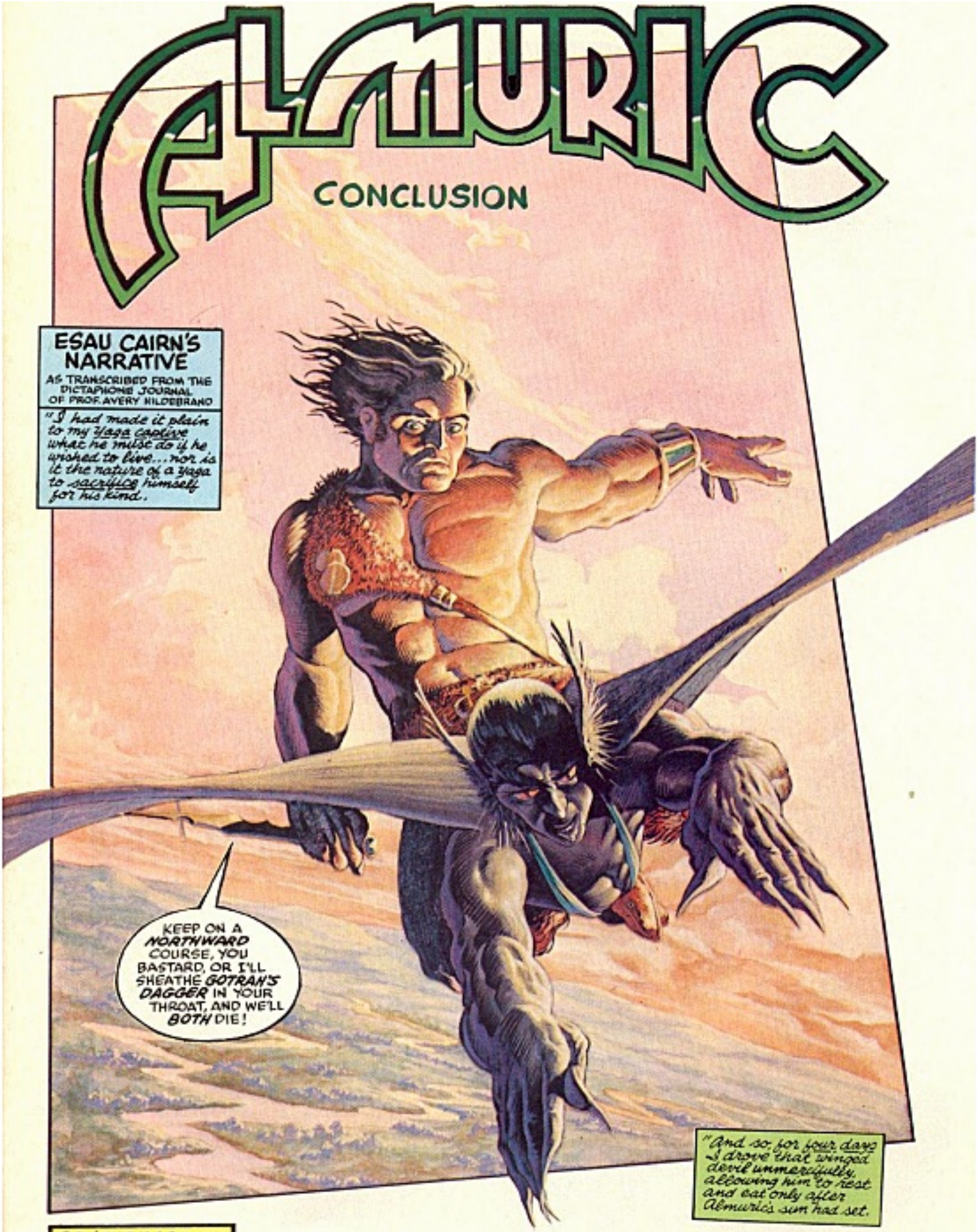
ALMURIC

CONCLUSION

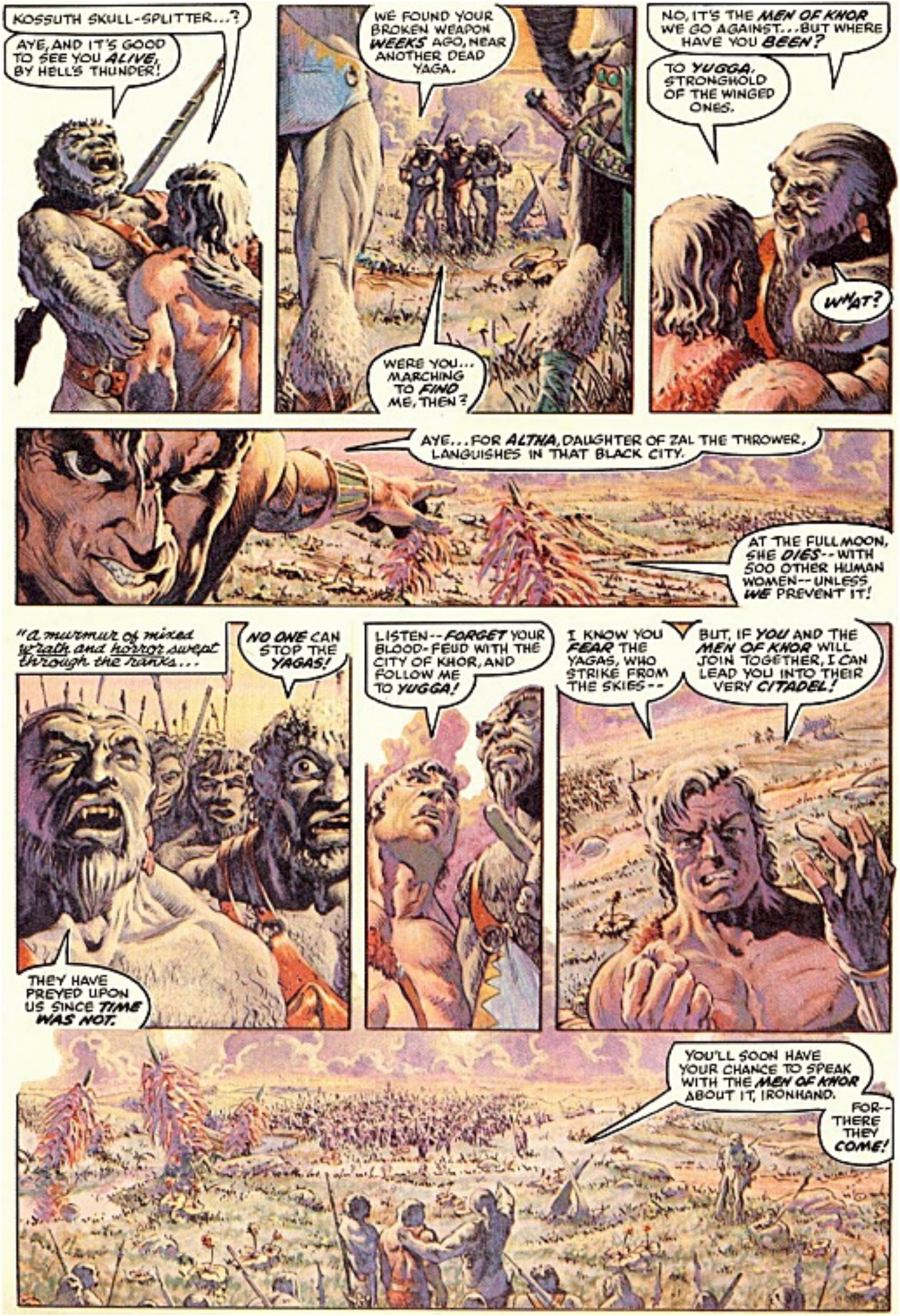

ESAU CAIRN'S NARRATIVE
AS TRANSCRIBED FROM THE DICTAPHONE JOURNAL OF PROF. AVERY HILDEBRAND
"I had made it plain to my Yaga captive what he must do if he wished to live... nor is it the nature of a yaga to sacrifice himself for his kind.
KEEP ON A NORTHWARD COURSE, YOU BASTARD, OR I'LL SHEATHE GOTRAH'S DAGGER IN YOUR THROAT, AND WE'LL BOTH DIE!
"And so, for four days I drove that winged devil unmercifully, allowing him to rest and eat only after Almuric's sun had set.

ROY THOMAS SCRIPT
TIM CONRAD ART
BASED ON THE NOVEL BY
ROBERT E. HOWARD

c 1980 Alla Ray Kuykendall

FROM PROF. HILDEBRAND'S FOOTNOTES TO THE NARRATIVE OF ESAU CAIRN:
It consistently amazed me, as I received Esau Cairn's mental messages from across the vast void of space, how much better his primitive instincts and mighty thews served him on the planet I call ALMURIC than ever they did on his native EARTH.
Here, those attributes merely made him an outcast -- nay, a CRIMINAL, after he was forced to kill the malignant cancer known as "BOSS" BLAINE.
Yet, on that other world, they enabled him to escape from YUGGA, that towering rock-fortress of the ebon-hearted YAGAS... and from its even more fearsome QUEEN YASMEENA.
Enabled him both to escape... and to ENDURE.
"Then, on the fourth day...
FLY OVER THAT WAY, YAGA!
YES, I THOUGHT SO!
WE'RE OVER KOTH'S TERRITORY NOW...
...AND THERE'S AN ARMY OF KOTHANS MARCHING BELOW!
"My intense interest, however...
"...almost proved my undoing!
YYAAA

"He might have thrown me then, the devil...
"...but I found something to grab onto.
RRRR
"He saw that our struggles were dragging us lower and lower toward the earth...
"...so he made a final desperate effort...
"But, at the same instant, I gave his head a terrific downward wrench...
"...and it was all I could do to turn him beneath me before we hit.
"Nor did he move, as I staggered to my feet.
IRONHAND!
BY THAK'S JAWBONES--IRONHAND!
"Half the bones in his light frame must have been splintered.


KOSSUTH SKULL-SPLITTER...?
AYE, AND IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU ALIVE, BY HELL'S THUNDER!
WE FOUND YOUR BROKEN WEAPON WEEKS AGO, NEAR ANOTHER DEAD YAGA.
WERE YOU... MARCHING TO FIND ME, THEN?
NO, IT'S THE MEN OF KHOR WE GO AGAINST... BUT WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?
TO YUGGA, STRONGHOLD OF THE WINGED ONES.
WHAT?
AYE... FOR ALTHA, DAUGHTER OF ZAL THE THROWER, LANGUISHES IN THAT BLACK CITY.
AT THE FULL MOON, SHE DIES -- WITH 500 OTHER HUMAN WOMEN -- UNLESS WE PREVENT IT!
"A murmur of mixed wrath and horror swept through the ranks...
NO ONE CAN STOP THE YAGAS!
THEY HAVE PREYED UPON US SINCE TIME WAS NOT.
LISTEN -- FORGET YOUR BLOOD-FEUD WITH THE CITY OF KHOR, AND FOLLOW ME TO YUGGA!
I KNOW YOU FEAR THE YAGAS, WHO STRIKE FROM THE SKIES --
BUT, IF YOU AND THE MEN OF KHOR WILL JOIN TOGETHER, I CAN LEAD YOU INTO THEIR VERY CITADEL!
YOU'LL SOON HAVE YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK WITH THE MEN OF KHOR ABOUT IT, IRONHAND.
FOR -- THERE THEY COME!

NOW WHAT SAY YOU?
I SAY, I'LL GO TO MEET THEM--ALONE--
--UNARMED.
NO, MEN OF KHOR!
EH?
WHAT MADMAN IS THIS, WHO COMES WITH EMPTY HANDS INTO THE TEETH OF WAR?
I AM ESAU IRONHAND, OF THE TRIBE OF KOTH...
...AND I WOULD PARLEY WITH BOTH YOU AND THE KOTHANS.
IN TRUTH, YOU'LL TELL YOUR LIES TO THE CLAW-BIRDS...
...THOUGH YOU'LL DO IT WITH YOUR THROAT WIDE-SLIT.
HOLD, BRAG!
I SAW THIS MAN FIGHT A LONGTOOTH ONCE, AND SLAY IT.
IT IS OUR LAW TO HEAR OUT BRAVE MEN.
THEN WE'LL KILL HIM!
HEAR ME, BOTH YOU TRIBES! I HAVE BEEN A CAPTIVE AMONG THE YAGAS, IN THE LAND OF YAGG...
...WHERE MANY OF YOUR WIVES AND DAUGHTERS HAVE BEEN SPIRITED.

"I was no orator, and I stood alone against old hatreds that made all the man-cities of Almuric foes to every other.
"Still, they blanched when I told them bluntly of the hell that was Yugga.
"I told of young girls dying beneath the ecstasies of eon demons or dismembered alive...
...aye and of torments which left the body unharmed, but sucked the mind empty of reason.
THESE ARE YOUR WOMEN WHO SCREAM UPON THE RACKS OF YUGGA -- WHILE YOU PLAY AT WAR, AND CALL YOURSELVES MEN!
GO HOME, RATHER, AND DON THE SKIRTS OF WOMEN!
"First one, then another of the beast-men shed unfamiliar tears...
"...so that, before I had finished, they were bellowing and beating their breasts with clenched fists...
"...and it was in grief and fury that they wept!
WE ARE MEN, ESAU IRONHAND!
LEAD US!
LEAD US!

"Southward we marched... 4000 men of Kolk, 5000 men of Khor... few of us destined to see our homeland again.

"Our pace was swift, and we lived off the land.

"Still, I chafed at every mile, Althea's fair face ever before me.

"Three weeks later, we had passed through the forest beyond which lay the Purple River...

"I trusted... no, prayed... that the Yagga would be too busy to see us coming...

"...too secure to consider the possibility that any foe would attack from the desert.

"...and the desert [illegible] rock [illegible]

"And so I came again to Yugga, the black city.

"Then, I spoke a quiet word to my friend, Thor the Bear...
COME.
"And I slid into the waters of the Purple River, striking out for the further shore, he following.
"At last, we found a flaw spot in the slippery wall...
"...upon which a sentry dozed, one of those wingless Akkis who served the Yagas...
"...and I drew myself up.
"The watchman, however, had not slept so soundly as I had expected...
"...so that, even as I gained the rampart...
"...starlight gleamed from a lowered, rapidly moving spear.
OH, SHIT.

"My desperate effort to avoid his blow nearly toppled me backward off the wall...
"...but all the same, it was I who lived to draw another breath.
AAAAA
DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT, GHOR.
WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED UP THERE?
JUST KEEP-- THOSE BASTARDS-- AWAY FROM ME--
--LONG ENOUGH-- UNNNH!-- FOR ME TO-- ARRH!--
IRONHAND! THERE'S TOO MANY OF THEM!
IT--DOESN'T MATTER NOW--
THE GATE'S OPEN!
DAMN! ARROWS!

"That meant the winged Yagos were stirring, for the Akkis had no bows.
STRIKE, MY WARRIORS! LET THE MAD BARBARIANS LEARN THE PRICE OF DARING TO ATTACK OUR CITADEL!

ALMURIC continues on page 91

BECAUSE IT'S THERE

by Ralph Macchio

Illustrated by Joe Jusko

"Something hidden — go and find it;
Go and look behind the Ranges;
Something lost behind the Ranges;
Lost and waiting for you. Go!"
Rudyard Kipling

The Mountain. Unnamed. Unbeaten. With the serenity known to things ageless, it has awaited my return. Now, after ten years, I stand before it again; as I did with the first expedition, as I have so many times in the dream. There is fever in my body. My eyes burn as I stare at the familiar peaks and experience the familiar urge — — to scale them to their summit.

Something moves into my field of vision. Green against the white of the snow, the slate grey of the rocks. A reptile. A creature from the dream. The fever at work. I don't react or betray what I'm feeling to Daltrey, my partner, still staring, awed, behind me. The climb has to go on.

Climbing is my passion. The lure of the unknown; conquering the unconquerable. These claim my soul as they have few other men. The only other thing I ever loved so much is Latinda.

Latinda. Fifteen years ago we met in a Manhattan museum. She was standing in front of an oil painting of Mount Everest. Her eyes seemed to study and trace each painted contour with a sensual fervor. More than her beauty, that fervor attracted me, for I saw in it a passion like my own. By the end of the afternoon, I knew I was correct. By the end of the evening, we were lovers. Inseparable.

Until the first expedition up the Mountain.

Paintings©1991 Joe Jusko

She loved climbing as much as I did. But close as we seemed, there were differences. During an ascent, I was all stark intensity, unshakeable concentration; the climb was an assault, an act of conquest. But Latinda would often stop, close her eyes and listen, listen to something beyond the wind moving through the peaks... something that brought her comfort and peace. At a summit, I stood manic, exhilarated. Latinda was quiet, contemplative, calmly expectant; as though waiting for something inevitable that hadn't happened yet. Whatever her feelings then, she never shared them with me; not even in those intimate reflective moments after lovemaking when feelings are most often shared. And somehow, the mystery, the not knowing, only made me desire her more.

That desire sustained our relationship during a time when Latinda began to grow distant, to withdraw. There was no question of her leaving, of having found anyone else. But in the worst moments, she would stiffen coldly at my touch, as though approached by a stranger. I could almost feel the rejection, like a tangible chill on my hands, as she'd move away.

Then we were asked to join an international expedition to scale the Mountain.

Latinda brightened at the news. No wonder. Not as high as Everest or the Matterhorn, its peak was the most inaccessible area on earth. Every past attempt to scale it ended in failure; failure often compounded with death. Its peculiar locale cursed it with raging crosswinds and sudden snowstorms which hid and disguised its surfaces of sandstone and shale. A killer mountain. A predator. It was there, and it had never been beaten. It drew fifteen of us to its base, representing over a dozen different nations. And it renewed the passion turned cold between Latinda and myself.

Until, one week later, five hundred feet from the Mountain's summit, it tore us apart forever.

I was last in the line of climbers when the wind and snow hit us, blizzard force. It tore several of us from the path of pitons we were following. As the lead climbers struggled to pull us up, the taunt stretch of nylon rope between me and Latinda, in the position just ahead of me, frayed against a sharp outcropping of slate. I fell thirty feet to a ledge below. The last sight I saw before losing consciousness was Latinda slowly disappearing upward into the fury of sleet and snow, looking at me, it seemed, with a strange, sad smile.

The expedition was never heard from again.

During the months in the hospital, the dreams began. Or rather, the dream. It was always the same. I return to the Mountain, fighting my way up that final distance I never managed to climb in reality.

Nightmare creatures observe my progress. And somewhere ahead, a dark figure looms. Fierce but feminine. Seeming at once to bar my way yet draw me on. I climb, I struggle. But long before I reach the uppermost peak... I wake up screaming. And thought I never saw the face of the dream's dark figure, somehow I am sure it is Latinda.

Now, ten years later, I am back to do what the dream never allows me... conquer the mountain that robbed me of the woman I love.

Enough staring, remembering. I start forward. Daltrey's hand catches my shoulder. "That sky looks bad, Wendell. We went through hell just getting this far. Let's camp. See how it looks in the morning. Start fresh."

Daltrey's an old friend. My partner on many climbs since I no longer have Latinda. Climbs that I realize now have been preparation, rehearsal, building my nerve to make *this* one again.

"No," I tell him, studying Daltrey's face, "I've waited too long for this."

"You're flushed, Wendell. It's fever, isn't it? You lied about how you were feeling this morning."

There is fear on Daltrey's face. He'a hiding it as I've hidden the fever. He reaches out to touch my forehead. I brush his hand away.

"I'm well enough to go on. Now. Waiting won't make it easy. Not here." I move on before he can stop me. Daltrey follows, still arguing.

"Wendell, look at yourself. You're sweating. Even in this cold. Suppose your hands start shaking? Suppose you slip? That's a monster of a mountain. If you're not in shape to tackle it – –"

I turn to face him again. A little green reptile skitters across the rocks beyond Daltrey. It watches me. Even though it isn't really there.

"I'm in shape, Daltrey. I'm going to climb it now. I'm going to end those damn dreams. With or without you."

I start on. His gloved hand clamps onto my shoulder again. Hard this time; its weight oppressive.

"We're not going another step. You're sick, Wendell. You can't climb if you're sick. Turn around, damn it. Turn around and listen to me!"

He yanks and I react like a cornered animal, spinning around, swinging at Daltrey. Swinging the hand that holds my ice ax. Blood explodes from his forehead and Daltrey is falling back, over the cliffside, falling away from me and the climb I have to make.

I tell myself it was an accident. I meant to hit him, but not with the hand that held the ax. But even as I think this, I am moving, starting to climb up the Mountain toward the end of the dream.

Relentlessly, I hurl myself against the mountain, fighting my way up until it is too dark to go on. I set up camp and climb into my sleeping bag, falling almost instantly into a fevered, uneasy slumber. How long it lasts, I am uncertain. One moment I am asleep, the next I am sitting up, listening. Listening for something beyond the moaning wind. Outside the tent, there is moonlight. And high, high above the ledge I am camped on, someone looks down. The dark figure of my dreams. There. And in an instant, gone.

Fast, fast as I can move, I break camp and climb. Assaulting rock, shale, snow and ice without skill or care, I scale upward with brute instinct toward the spot where I saw the figure. Occasionally, I believe I glimpse it, always just ahead. Higher.

The Mountain seems to fight me. Gusts of wind threaten to whip me off its dark, sheer face. I become light-headed, dizzy, as the air grows thinner. Somewhere above is another ledge. I look up, expecting to glimpse the furtive shadow. There is a low rumble. Rockslide. Snowslide. I cling to my ropes as the cascade tumbles around me threatening to carry me down with it. Not rocks. Not snow. *Skulls! Human bone!* Shattering. Splintering. Something snags my parka, slams at my face. I scream and cling tighter. And finally, it ends.

An eternity later, I am pulling myself up onto the once-distant ledge.

She is waiting. A shadow no more.

Ice goddess, I think. But that is wrong. She is a warrior, a defender, girded for battle, ready to combat anyone who would assault this final stretch of the Mountain's crown. The flags and bones of past attackers lay littered about her. The tiny green creatures of my fever scamper around the remains. My mind fights what my eyes see. For the figure before me is even *more* than an icy, barbaric warrioress.

She is *Latinda.*

"Yes, my love," she says, and at her words the wind diminishes to a whisper, "Why do you seem shocked? You've been searching for me, haven't you? Isn't that *really* why you're here?"

"In God's name, how can this be? You can't have survived in this frozen waste for ten years. You... you have to be dead! I... the fever..."

"Call it what you will, Wendell. But I *am* here. Now you seek to deny the instincts that brought you."

"The others. The rest of the first expedition. If you've survived, what happened to them?"

"I fed off them, Wendell. They were my sustenance until I became one with the spirit of the Mountain. Now I am nourished by that alone."

She begins to back away as we speak. Slowly, but steadily. Easing upward toward the Mountain's snowy crest. I step forward, following, praying the fever has made me mad.

"You cannibalized a dozen human beings? Latinda, you were the woman I loved!"

A strange, sad smile touches her face. A smile I feel I've seen before.

"My poor Wendell. I've always belonged to the Mountain. That's been my destiny since before the day you and I met. It was only a matter of someday finding my way here... when I finally did, it was like coming home. I cared for you, Wendell... but this is where I was *meant* to be. When the storm separated you and me and later killed the expedition... I remained alive by the Mountain's will, to carry its spirit... to guard it forever from conquest."

I try to climb forward more quickly. A fire eats at my mind; sweat seems to creep from every pore of my body. I shrug off equipment, anything that encumbers me at all. The flag tucked inside my jacket to be planted when I reach the final peak. The watch that seems to snag on my wrist and hamper each desperate, rushed movement I make.

"Latinda, if you really cared... Why did you appear in the dreams, drawing me back here... back to see... this?"

She stops, facing me a few feet short of the summit. Sad. Beautiful. Deadly.

"I was warning you *away*, Wendell. But your need to possess me and the Mountain brought you anyway. Not even the skulls I showered down on you in warning turned you back. This is where it ends, Wendell. Come further and, however much I cared for you in the past, I *have* to carry out the will of the Mountain."

I look at her face, past the warrioress's crown, the Mountain's icy touch, and I still see *my* Latinda there. And I know what I must do. I start to turn, to leave... and then I charge forward, upward, screaming as I do.

"I'll beat the Mountain as I beat every other one! I'll win you back, Latinda! I'll — —"

This time the ax that whispers through the air is wielded by another hand. This time the blood that explodes at its impact is mine.

I don't feel my body hit the snow. I only feel the cold, creeping, creeping into every part of me. Until finally it reaches deep into my mind and stills even the fever-inferno there. The last sight I see is the woman warrior who was once Latinda lifting sadly the flag that would have been the symbol of my victory, then dropping it, as she walks slowly away, one with the Mountain to which she belongs.

Then I open my eyes.

I am sitting up in my sleeping bag, still in my tent, body shaking with fever chills, mind still churning with the dream that has jolted me awake.

Outside there is moonlight. And high, high above the ledge I am camped upon, someone looks down. The dark figure of my dreams. *Latinda.* Warning me away one more time. In an instant, she is gone.

Above where I saw her, I see the sparkling Mountain crest. Defiant. Unconquered.

I gather up my equipment swiftly. Fever creatures, green, reptilian, scuttle across the nearby rocks. Ignoring them, I move forward, the soft snow crunching under my boots.

The Mountain and Latinda wait. The dream is not yet over.

BY THE YEAR 2079, THE NEW BRITISH EMPIRE HAD HAD ENOUGH OF THE LONG CONTINUING INSURGENCY IN NORTHERN IRELAND. ESCAPING WORLD WAR III'S NUCLEAR HOLOCAUST, GREATER BRITAIN HAD RISEN TO PREEMINENCE ON EARTH AND THE PLANETARY COLONIES. THE MOON, NOW STRIP-MINED, PLAYED-OUT ROCK, SEEMED THE IDEAL PLACE TO SEND THE REBELLIOUS IRISH. BUT BRITAIN STOPPED SHORT OF GRANTING THEM INDEPENDENCE, AND "THE TROUBLES" BEGAN AGAIN UNTIL, IN 2180, THE EMPIRE FOUND ITSELF FACED WITH A NEW INSURGENCY...
The Rising of the Moon
"O then tell me, Sean O'Farrell, tell me why you hurry so."
"Hush my brother, hush and listen," and his cheeks were all aglow.
"I bear orders from the captain, get you ready quick and soon, for the pikes must be together at the rising of the moon!"

By the rising of the moon,
By the rising of the moon,
For the pikes must be together
By the rising of the moon!

"O then tell me, Sean O'Farrell,
where the gathering is to be?"

"In the old spot by the crater
right well known to you and me.
One more word for signal-token,
whistle up the marching tune,
with your pike upon your shoulder
By the rising of the moon!"

On the rim of many a crater...
eyes were watching through the night.
many a manly heart
was throbbing
for the coming morning
light.
murmurs ran along the rimrocks
like the banshee's lonely croon,

and a thousand pikes went flashing
by the rising of the moon!
by the rising of the moon,
by the rising of the moon,
and a thousand pikes went flashing
by the rising of the moon.
there upon that pockmarked surface
that dark mass of men were seen,
far above their shining weapons hung
their own beloved green!
death to every foe and traitor
forward strike the marching tune
and hurrah me boys for freedom,
tis the rising of the moon!
tis the rising of the moon,
tis the rising of the moon,
and hurrah me boys for freedom
tis the rising of the moon!

EPILOGUE:
THE LUNAR MASSACRE OF 2180 GAVE RISE TO UNIVERSAL COLONIAL ANGER AGAINST THE GREATER BRITISH EMPIRE. IN 3001 THE LUNAR PROVISIONAL ARMY AGAIN LED A REVOLT AGAINST IMPERIAL AUTHORITY, AND THIS TIME SUCCEEDED IN WINNING INDEPENDENCE.
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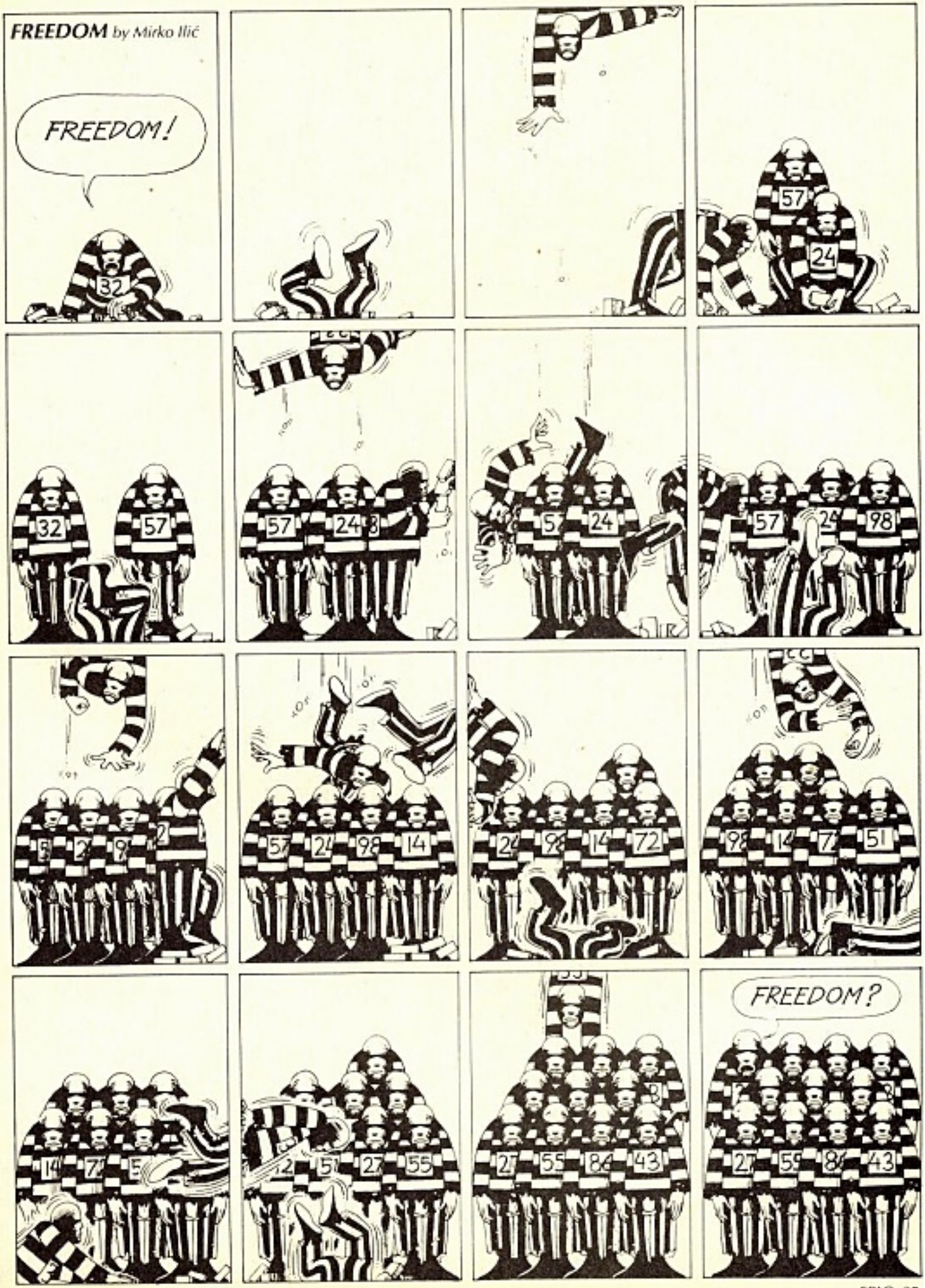

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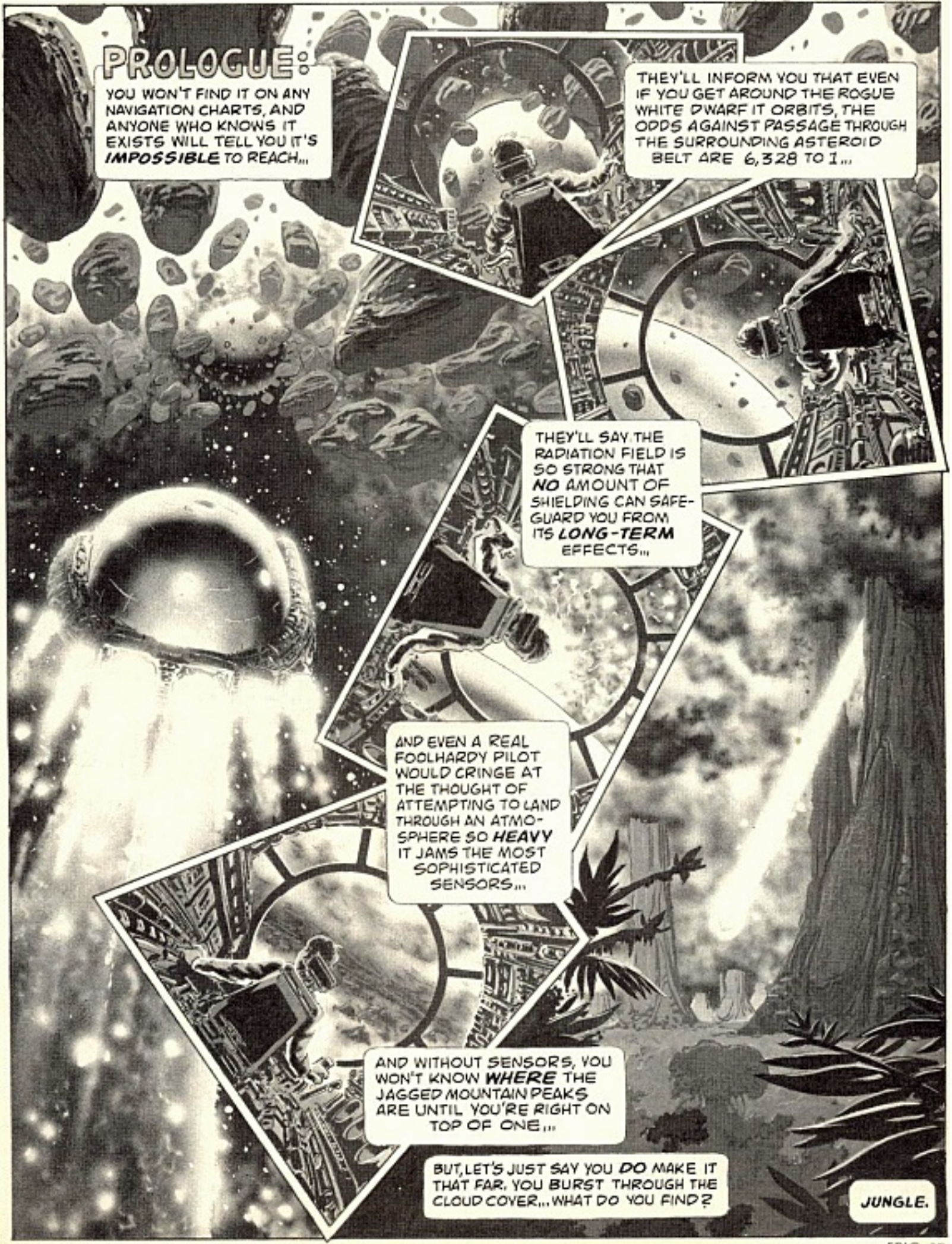
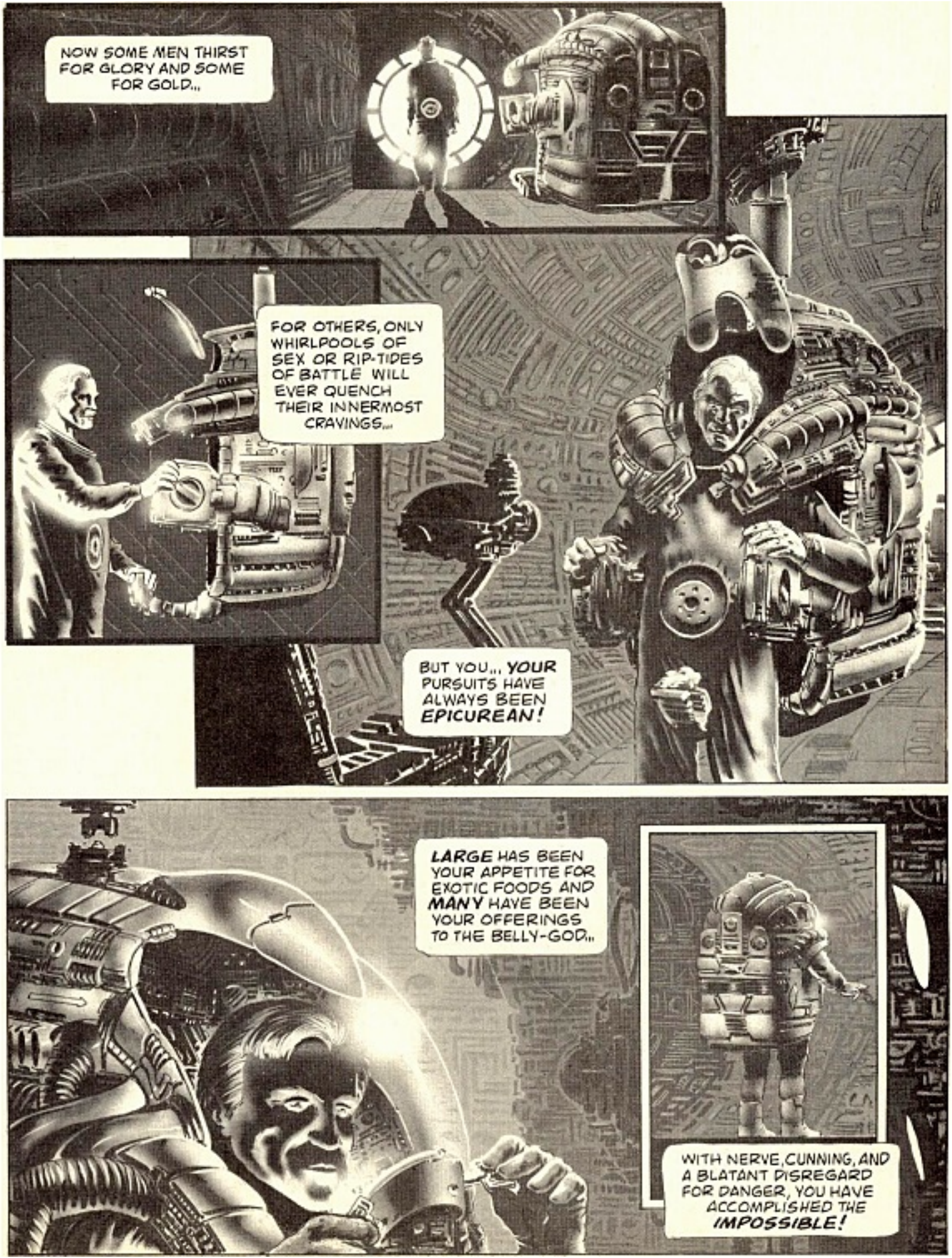

PROLOGUE:
YOU WON'T FIND IT ON ANY NAVIGATION CHARTS, AND ANYONE WHO KNOWS IT EXISTS WILL TELL YOU IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO REACH...
THEY'LL INFORM YOU THAT EVEN IF YOU GET AROUND THE ROGUE WHITE DWARF IT ORBITS, THE ODDS AGAINST PASSAGE THROUGH THE SURROUNDING ASTEROID BELT ARE 6,328 TO 1...
THEY'LL SAY THE RADIATION FIELD IS SO STRONG THAT NO AMOUNT OF SHIELDING CAN SAFE-GUARD YOU FROM ITS LONG-TERM EFFECTS...
AND EVEN A REAL FOOLHARDY PILOT WOULD CRINGE AT THE THOUGHT OF ATTEMPTING TO LAND THROUGH AN ATMO-SPHERE SO HEAVY IT JAMS THE MOST SOPHISTICATED SENSORS...
AND WITHOUT SENSORS, YOU WON'T KNOW WHERE THE JAGGED MOUNTAIN PEAKS ARE UNTIL YOU'RE RIGHT ON TOP OF ONE...
BUT, LET'S JUST SAY YOU DO MAKE IT THAT FAR. YOU BURST THROUGH THE CLOUD COVER... WHAT DO YOU FIND?
JUNGLE.

©1984 Dick Veitch

EVERYWHERE, JUNGLE SO THICK THAT LIGHT ITSELF CAN'T PIERCE THE IMPENETRABLE CANOPY!
IT'S SHEER SUICIDE TO LAND A CRAFT IN ANYTHING LIKE THAT!
THEY'LL TELL YOU ALL THIS AND PROBABLY A LOT MORE...
SO, YOU GO AND DO IT, ANYWAY!
CONQUEST OF THE BANANA PLANET!
BY RICK VEITCH


NOW SOME MEN THIRST FOR GLORY AND SOME FOR GOLD...
FOR OTHERS, ONLY WHIRLPOOLS OF SEX OR RIP-TIDES OF BATTLE WILL EVER QUENCH THEIR INNERMOST CRAVINGS...
BUT YOU... YOUR PURSUITS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN EPICUREAN!
LARGE HAS BEEN YOUR APPETITE FOR EXOTIC FOODS AND MANY HAVE BEEN YOUR OFFERINGS TO THE BELLY-GOD...
WITH NERVE, CUNNING, AND A BLATANT DISREGARD FOR DANGER, YOU HAVE ACCOMPLISHED THE IMPOSSIBLE!

AND NOW, STAND READY TO BE THE FIRST MORTAL TO REAP THE FORBIDDEN FRUITS OF THE BANANA PLANET!
YAAARGH!
NNNG
ENNH!
UNNNGH!
SPLOT!
UNNGHH!
ENH. ENH. ENH...?
AFTER THE BITTER CURSES AND CRIES OF DESPAIR HAVE LONG ENDED..
...IS WHEN THE FEAST REALLY BEGINS!

AT LAST ALL THE CHILDREN OF ORSIROSIAN DOOM STAND GATHERED. READY TO END THE DREAD ZYGOTEAN NIGHTMARE.
I'VE WORKED A LIFETIME TO ACHIEVE THIS MOMENT'S UNITY. I'M SURE IT WILL PROVE WORTHY OF THAT EFFORT.
CHAPTER VIII
Sunrise on Lartorez
©1981 J.P. Starlin

NOW ONLY THE SECRET OF THIS AMULET STANDS BETWEEN US AND OUR VENGEANCE.
WITHIN THIS TRINKET LIES THE SECRET OF THE INFINITY HORN'S WHEREABOUTS AND OTHER MYSTERIES AND QUALITIES WE'LL NEED TO REACH THE FINAL MOMENTS.

BUT SUCH WONDERS ARE NOT GAINED WHILE IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS OR ON PLANE OF EXISTENCE SUCH AS THIS ONE.
SO YOU'RE TAKING OFF FOR A WHILE...?

YES, BUT FOR HOW LONG A WHILE I FEAR I CANNOT SAY. FOR THE PLACE I GO PLAYS STRANGE TRICKS WITH TIME, BUT AWAIT ME, FOR I SHALL RETURN...
GONE... DAMN!

ALREADY I CAN FEEL THEIR EYES BORING INTO ME.

NOW IT'LL BEGIN. IT ALWAYS DOES WHEN SOME NEWCOMER DROPS INTO A CLOSE-KNIT GROUP LIKE THESE THREE HAVE BECOME.
THEY'VE ALWAYS GOT TO TEST YOU. SEE WHAT YOUR GUTS ARE MADE OF.
TROUBLE IS, I'M HERE TO PROTECT THIS GROUP.
I'LL HAVE TO TAKE IT EASY, WHICH HAS NEVER BEEN EASY FOR ME TO DO.

SO *THIS* IS THE PROTECTION AKNADIN PROMISED US... NOT QUITE WHAT I EXPECTED--OR, SHOULD I SAY, NOT AS *MANY* AS I EXPECTED.
YES, JUST *ONE* MAN WITH A BEARD, AND HIM ONLY *HALF* THE SIZE OF ZA.
BUT SURELY THE MASTER WOULDN'T TRUST OUR SAFETY TO ONE WHOSE ABILITIES MATCH HIS STATURE.
PERHAPS THIS LITTLE MAN HAS HIDDEN POWERS...?
MAYBE HIDDEN SOME PLACE LIKE UNDER HIS HOOD...
KATOOW!

SORRY ABOUT THAT...
... BUT THE 'LITTLE MAN' HAS ALWAYS BEEN RATHER 'SENSITIVE' ABOUT HIS HEIGHT.
IF YOU NEED THE 'JUST ONE MAN' FOR ANYTHING, I'LL BE OVER ON THE RIDGE KEEPING AN EYE ON THE HORIZON.
ZA, ARE YOU OK?
YES... ZA... ALL RIGHT...
LITTLE MAN SURE HIT HARD...
THE MASTER MADE A GOOD CHOICE WITH THAT ONE... ZA'S HEAD WILL BE RINGING FOR HOURS.
ZA...?
WHY DO YOU CALL AKNATON... THE MASTER?
BECAUSE HE DESERVES IT. HE CAME TO ME IN A MOMENT OF DARKNESS, STOPPED ME FROM STEPPING TO A DEATH BOTH MAD AND WASTEFUL.
HE SAVED ME FROM MYSELF.
BUT WHAT DID HE RESCUE YOU FOR, ZA?
I DON'T KNOW...
... MAYBE HE SAVED ME FOR A BETTER DEATH.

DAMN THAT BALD PULSAR SUCKER... STUCK ME WORKING WITH A BUNCH OF AMATEURS.
STILL, THIS JOB DOES... EH?
WHO?!
NO NEED FOR THAT, VANTH.
I'M ON YOUR SIDE... REMEMBER?
IS THAT RIGHT...
I'M SORRY ABOUT BACK THERE... SORRY AND GRATEFUL.
THANK YOU FOR NOT HURTING ZA. I REALIZED, WHEN YOU STRUCK, THAT WITHIN YOU LIES THE POWER TO HAVE KILLED ZA SEVERAL TIMES OVER WITH THAT ONE BLOW.
WE'RE ALL VERY NERVOUS ABOUT WHAT LIES AHEAD. I GUESS WE WERE JUST TRYING TO WORK OFF THAT TENSION AT YOUR EXPENSE.
THAT WAS WRONG OF US. WE SHOULD HAVE REALIZED THAT THIS SITUATION IS SURELY JUST AS HARD ON YOU AS IT IS ON US.
WELL, LET'S JUST SAY IT'S A BIT CONFUSING...
JUST A COUPLE OF HOURS AGO I WAS BACK ON BYFREXIA BATTLING ZYGS THE WAY I KNOW BEST.
THEN UP POPS YOUR AKNATON WITH SOME WILD SCHEME TO BLAST ALL THE ZYGS TO HADES, AND LIKE SOME YOUNG FOOL I FOLLOW HIM WITHOUT THINKING.
I DON'T KNOW WHY I DID IT, EITHER... MAYBE IT WAS SOMETHING IN HIS VOICE...

BUT NOW YOU'RE WONDERING WHY YOU'VE COME AND WHY YOU... YOU ALONE WERE NEEDED.
YEAH, I GUESS SO...
THE ANSWER TO BOTH THOSE QUESTIONS LIE WITHIN YOUR EYES.
THERE IS DEATH IN THOSE BLUE POOLS.
THOSE EYES HAVE NOT ONLY COME TO ACCEPT DEATH BUT HAVE CHOSEN TO EMBRACE IT AS A WAY OF LIFE.
YOU'RE NEEDED HERE BECAUSE ONLY ONE SUCH AS YOU COULD TRULY UNDERSTAND THE ZYGOTEANS AND DEFEND US FROM THEIR WRATH.
SORT OF FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE... eh?
YES... I DIDN'T PLAN IT THIS WAY BUT I SUPPOSE THAT'S WHAT I'VE BECOME.
AND THAT'S WHY YOU DECIDED TO FOLLOW AKNATON, ISN'T IT?
IT WASN'T AKNATON'S WORDS THAT SWAYED YOU. IT WAS WHAT YOU SENSED IN HIS PLAN AND ABOUT HIM THAT ATTRACTED YOU.
YES... YOU'RE RIGHT. EVER SINCE I MET ANK, I'VE SMELLED DEATH IN THE AIR...
...AND MAY THE STARS FORGIVE ME, BUT I CAN'T SAY IT HASN'T EXCITED ME.
WHAT HAVE I GOTTEN MYSELF INTO?

DEATH.
YOU'VE FOUND EXACTLY THAT WHICH ALL MEN OF YOUR KIND SEEK, BUT ON A SCALE EVEN THE WORST OF YOU NEVER DREAM OF.
WHAT THE FROZEN HELL ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
COULD IT BE THAT YOU REALLY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT?
I DOUBT IT, BUT STILL YOU'RE NOT FROM THE WORLD OF THE WOODS.
WE OF THE FOREST PEOPLE HAVE HAD MANY GENERATIONS TO DULL OUR HORROR OF AKNATON'S MADNESS. IT'S ALLOWED US TO DEFINE IT AND ACCEPT IT.
FOR WE ARE THE CHILDREN... THE CREATIONS, LIKE YOUR SWORD, OF LORD AKNATON AND PART OF HIS BLACK DRAMA. SO NOW THAT WE ARE CONFRONTED WITH IT WE RECOGNIZE IT FOR WHAT IT IS.
YOU, ON THE OTHER HAND, ARE NEW TO AKNATON'S INSANITY. SO EVEN NOW AS YOU STAND BEFORE IT FACE TO FACE, YOUR MIND REFUSES TO ACCEPT ITS DARK TRUTH.
ACCEPT!!? BLAST YOUR WINGS, WOMAN. WHY DOES EVERYONE KEEP TELLING ME TO 'ACCEPT,' BUT NOBODY'S TELLING ME WHAT IT IS I'M SUPPOSED TO 'ACCEPT'.
EVERYONE KEEPS TALKING ABOUT DOOM, DESTRUCTION AND DEATH BUT NOBODY SAYS WHO, WHEN OR WHERE.
EVERYONE KEEPS...
YOU FORGOT TO MENTION SUICIDE.
SUICIDE..?

I THINK IT'S BEST THAT YOU FACE THE TRUTH. THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO NOW TO CHANGE WHAT IS TO BE. WE'VE ALL RUN OUT OF CHOICES.
...AND MAYBE YOU'VE SOME GOD YOU'D LIKE TO COME TO TERMS WITH BEFORE THE END.

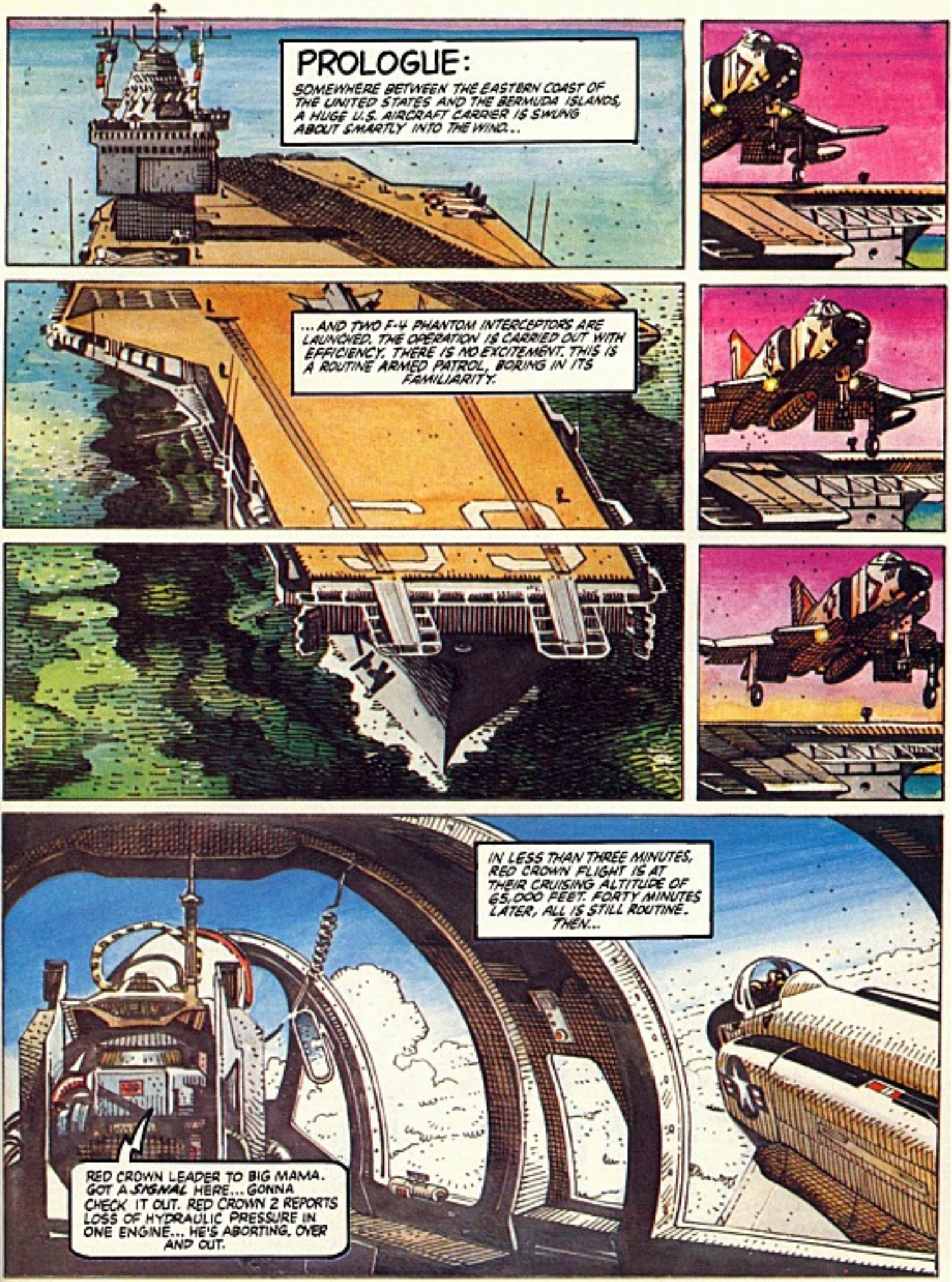
FIRST OF ALL, YOU MUST REALIZE THAT THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO WAY TO STOP THE ZYGOTEANS FROM CONQUERING THE ENTIRE GALAXY.
THE PEOPLE OF ORSIROS, WHO WERE PROBABLY THE MOST ADVANCED RACE AMONG THE STARS, HAVE TRIED FOR CENTURIES TO STOP THE ZYGOTEAN JUGGERNAUT AND FAILED.

REALIZING THIS, THE ORSIROSIANS PIERCED THE VEIL THAT HIDES THE MANY FUTURES THAT AWAIT US AND SAW THAT ALL BUT ONE PATH LED TO BASE ENSLAVEMENT AND DEATH FOR THE ENTIRE GALAXY AT THE HANDS OF THE ZYGOTEANS.
SO AKNATON AND HIS PEOPLE CREATED THE INFINITY HORN, THE ULTIMATE DOOMSDAY WEAPON AND MORE.

THEY THEN HID IT AWAY UNTIL THE DAY THAT THE WORLD OF ORSIROS WOULD FALL AND THE ZYGOTEAN MADNESS WOULD STAND TRIUMPHANT AND UNCHECKED.
THAT DAY IS HERE.

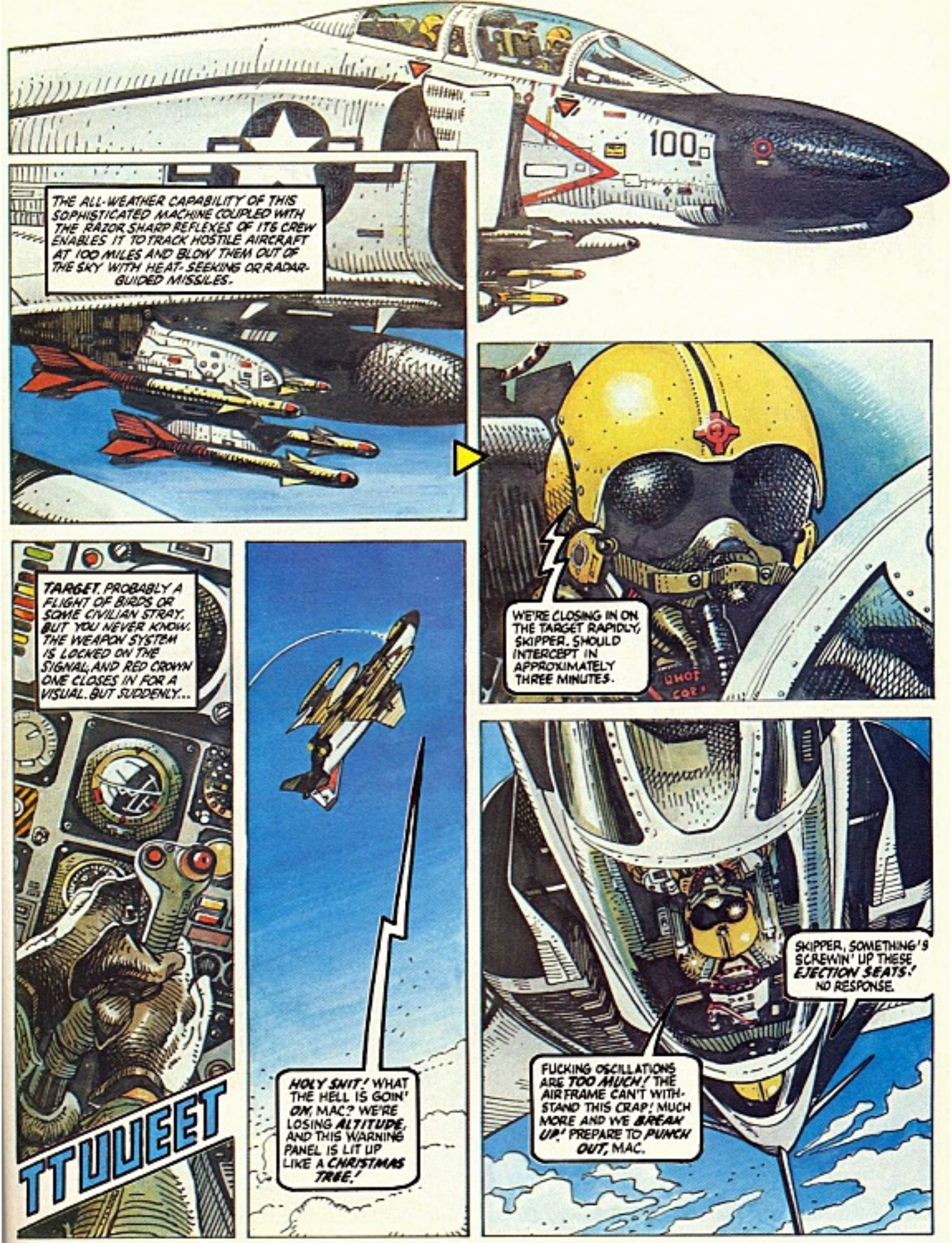
SO THE TIME HAS COME TO MAKE USE OF ORSIROS' FINAL GIFT OF MERCY TO A DYING GALAXY.
THE MOMENT HAS COME FOR THE INFINITY HORN TO BRING AN END TO ALL LIFE IN THE MILKY WAY GALAXY.

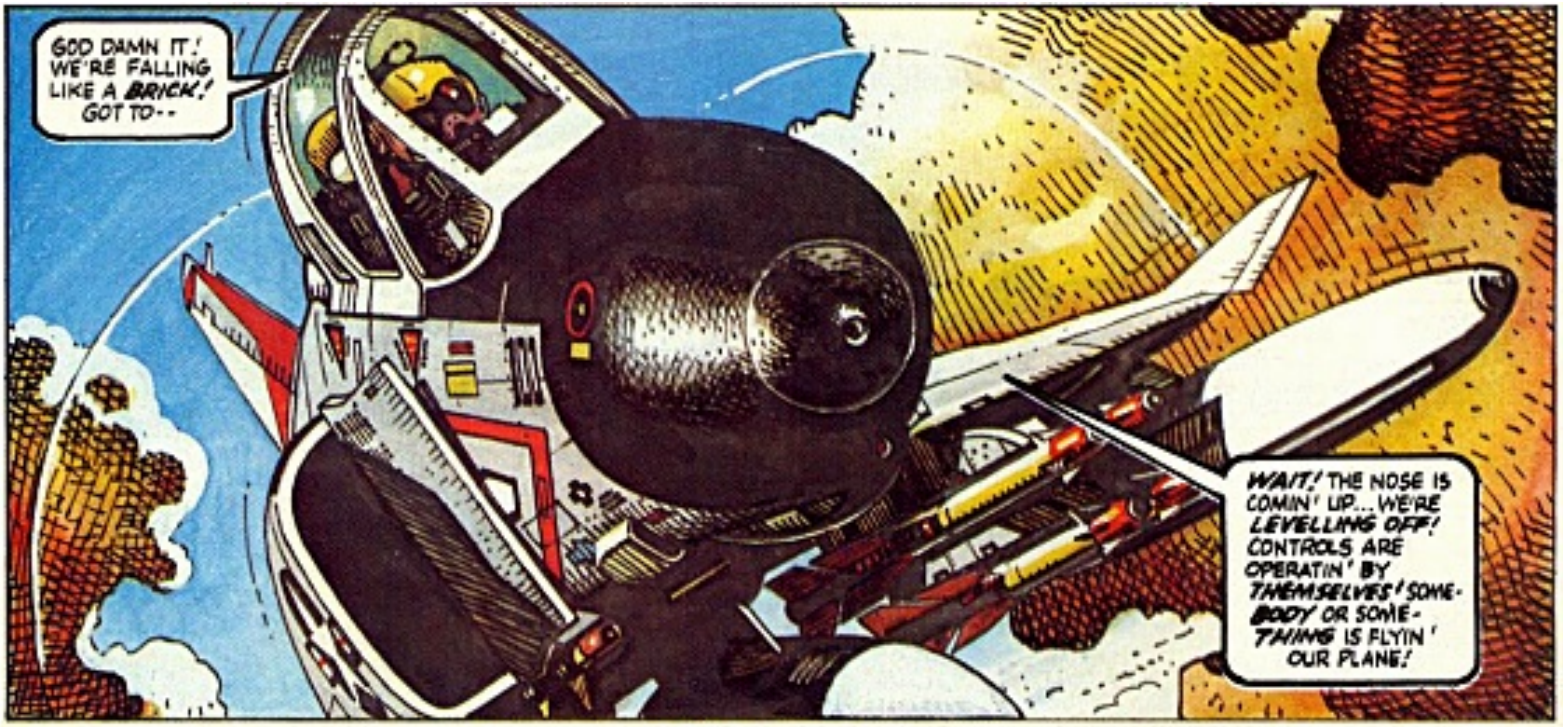
METAMORPHOSIS ODYSSEY continues next issue

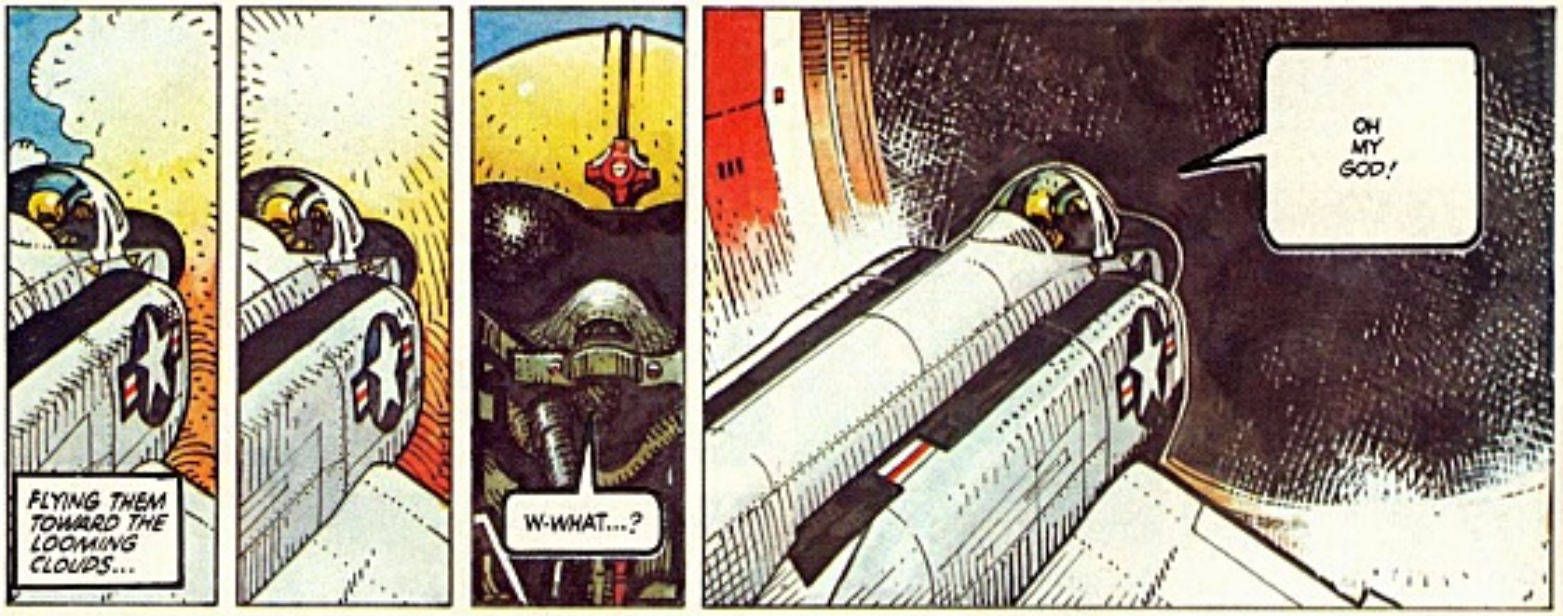

PROLOGUE:
SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE EASTERN COAST OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE BERMUDA ISLANDS, A HUGE U.S. AIRCRAFT CARRIER IS SWUNG ABOUT SMARTLY INTO THE WIND...
...AND TWO F-4 PHANTOM INTERCEPTORS ARE LAUNCHED. THE OPERATION IS CARRIED OUT WITH EFFICIENCY. THERE IS NO EXCITEMENT. THIS IS A ROUTINE ARMED PATROL, BORING IN ITS FAMILIARITY.
IN LESS THAN THREE MINUTES, RED CROWN FLIGHT IS AT THEIR CRUISING ALTITUDE OF 65,000 FEET. FORTY MINUTES LATER, ALL IS STILL ROUTINE. THEN...
RED CROWN LEADER TO BIG MAMA. GOT A SIGNAL HERE... GONNA CHECK IT OUT. RED CROWN 2 REPORTS LOSS OF HYDRAULIC PRESSURE IN ONE ENGINE... HE'S ABORTING. OVER AND OUT.

©1981 Pepe Moreno

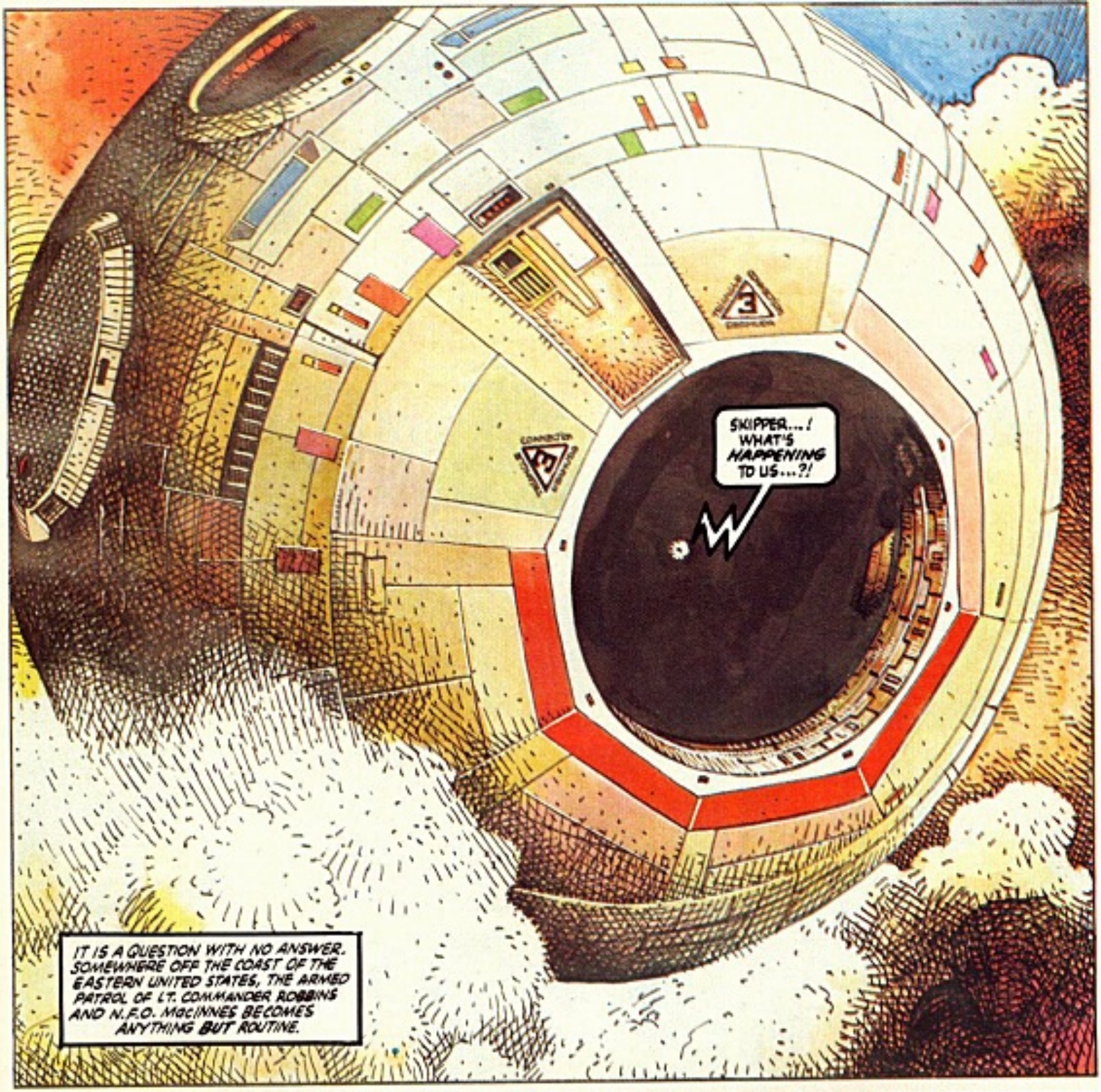
OKAY, ROBBIE...WE'RE HEADING BACK TO BIG MAMA. DON'T GO GETTIN' LOST WITHOUT US.
NH
5882
US NAVY
100
flight back
AT THE CONTROLS OF RED CROWN ONE, LT. COMMANDER BLAKE ROBBINS SMILES BENEATH HIS OXYGEN MASK. OVER THE INTERCOM HE HEARS HIS NAVIGATIONAL FLIGHT OFFICER, GEORGE MacINNES, SWEAR SOFTLY. FROM PEA-SOUPERS TO NEAR-HURRICANES, MAC HAS NEVER FAILED TO GUIDE THEM HOME.
PEPE


100
THE ALL-WEATHER CAPABILITY OF THIS SOPHISTICATED MACHINE COUPLED WITH THE RAZOR SHARP REFLEXES OF ITS CREW ENABLES IT TO TRACK HOSTILE AIRCRAFT AT 100 MILES AND BLOW THEM OUT OF THE SKY WITH HEAT-SEEKING OR RADAR-GUIDED MISSILES.
WE'RE CLOSING IN ON THE TARGET RAPIDLY, SKIPPER. SHOULD INTERCEPT IN APPROXIMATELY THREE MINUTES.
TARGET. PROBABLY A FLIGHT OF BIRDS OR SOME CIVILIAN STRAY. BUT YOU NEVER KNOW. THE WEAPON SYSTEM IS LOCKED ON THE SIGNAL, AND RED CROWN ONE CLOSES IN FOR A VISUAL. BUT SUDDENLY...
TTUUEET
HOLY SHIT! WHAT THE HELL IS GOIN' ON, MAC? WE'RE LOSING ALTITUDE, AND THIS WARNING PANEL IS LIT UP LIKE A CHRISTMAS TREE!
FUCKING OSCILLATIONS ARE TOO MUCH! THE AIRFRAME CAN'T WITHSTAND THIS CRAP! MUCH MORE AND WE BREAK UP! PREPARE TO PUNCH OUT, MAC.
SKIPPER, SOMETHING'S SCREWIN' UP THESE EJECTION SEATS! NO RESPONSE.

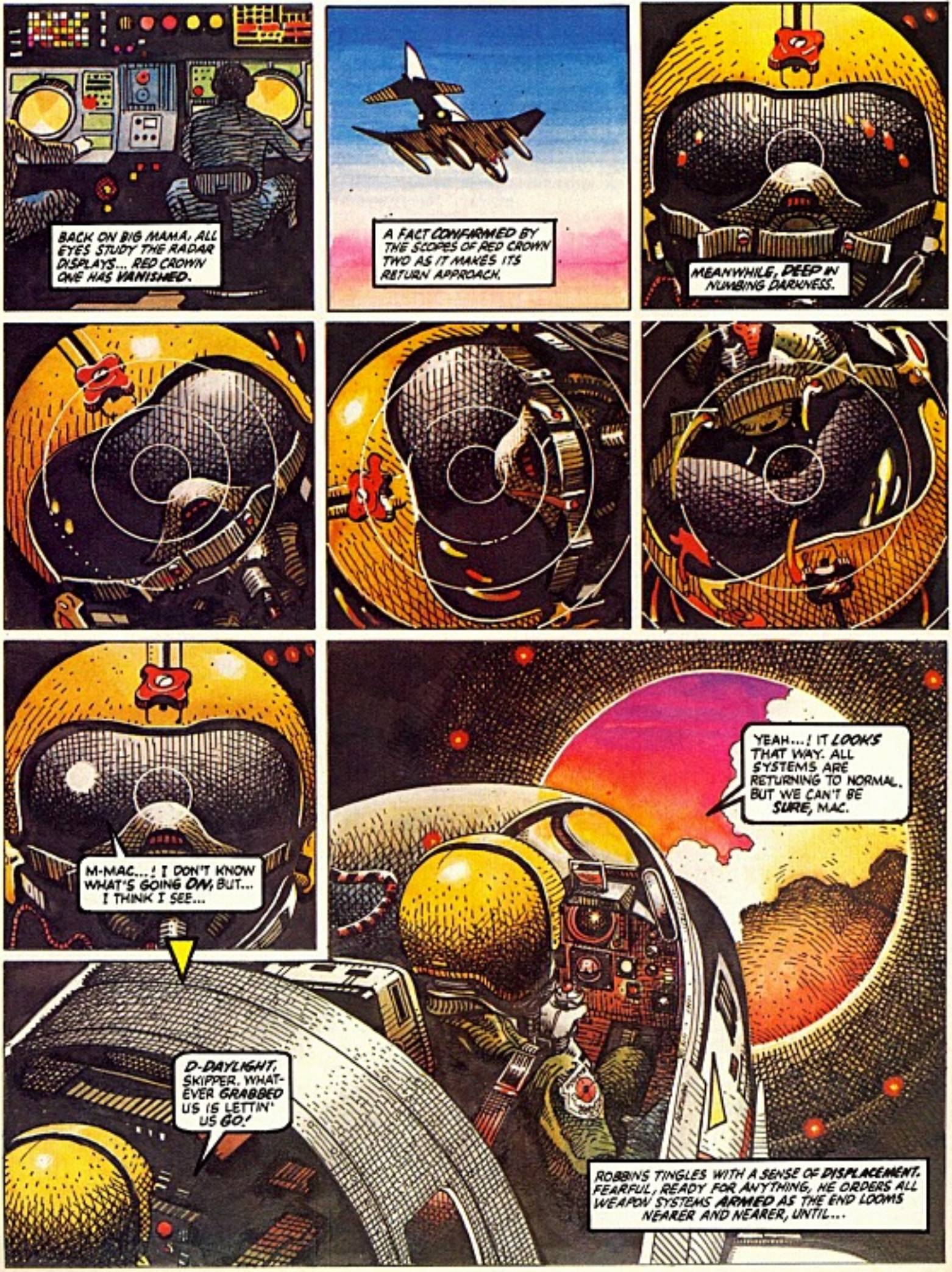

GOD DAMN IT! WE'RE FALLING LIKE A BRICK! GOT TO--
WAIT! THE NOSE IS COMIN' UP... WE'RE LEVELLING OFF! CONTROLS ARE OPERATIN' BY THEMSELVES! SOME-BODY OR SOME-THING IS FLYIN' OUR PLANE!

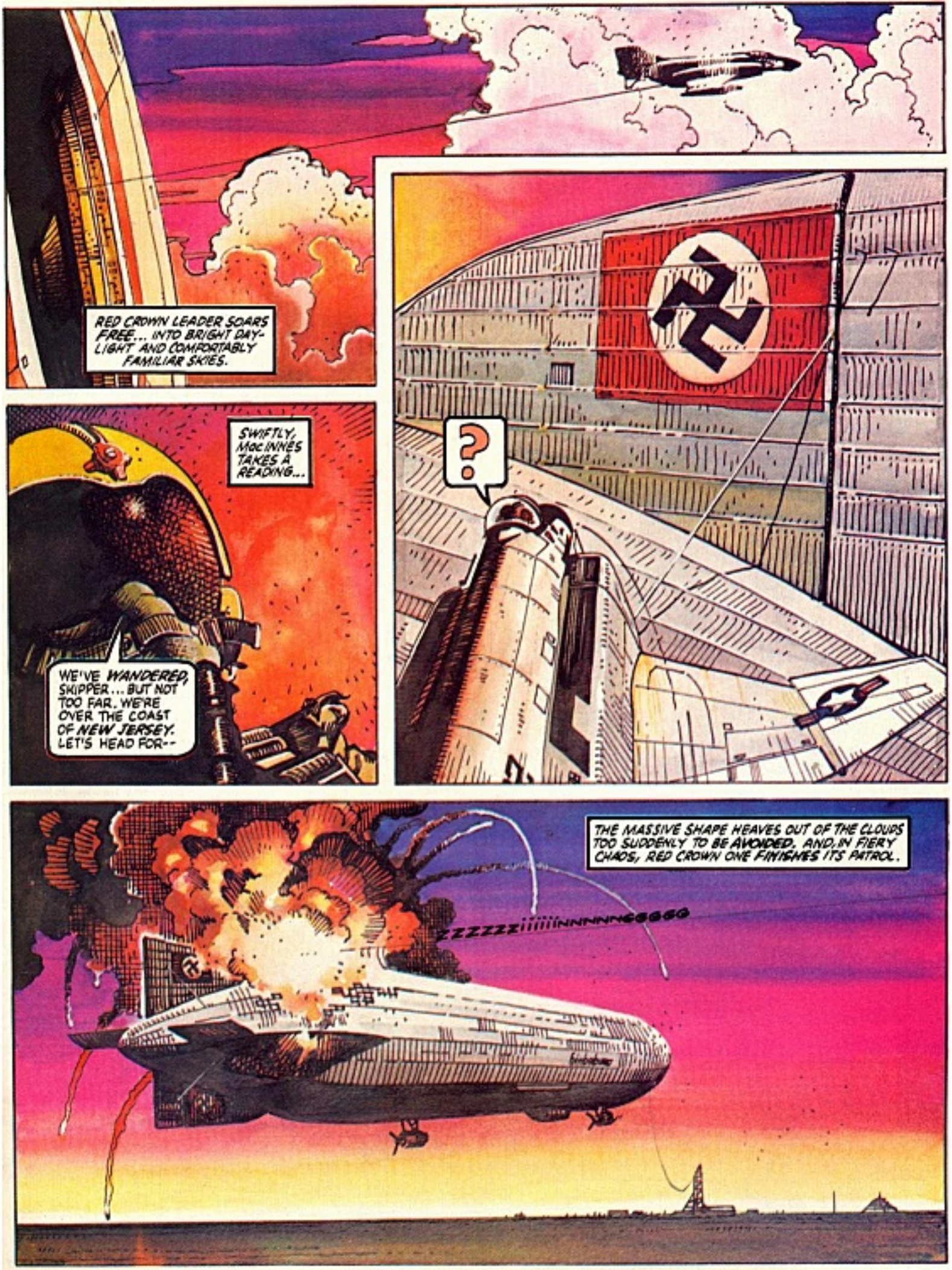

FLYING THEM TOWARD THE LOOMING CLOUDS...
W-WHAT...?
OH MY GOD!

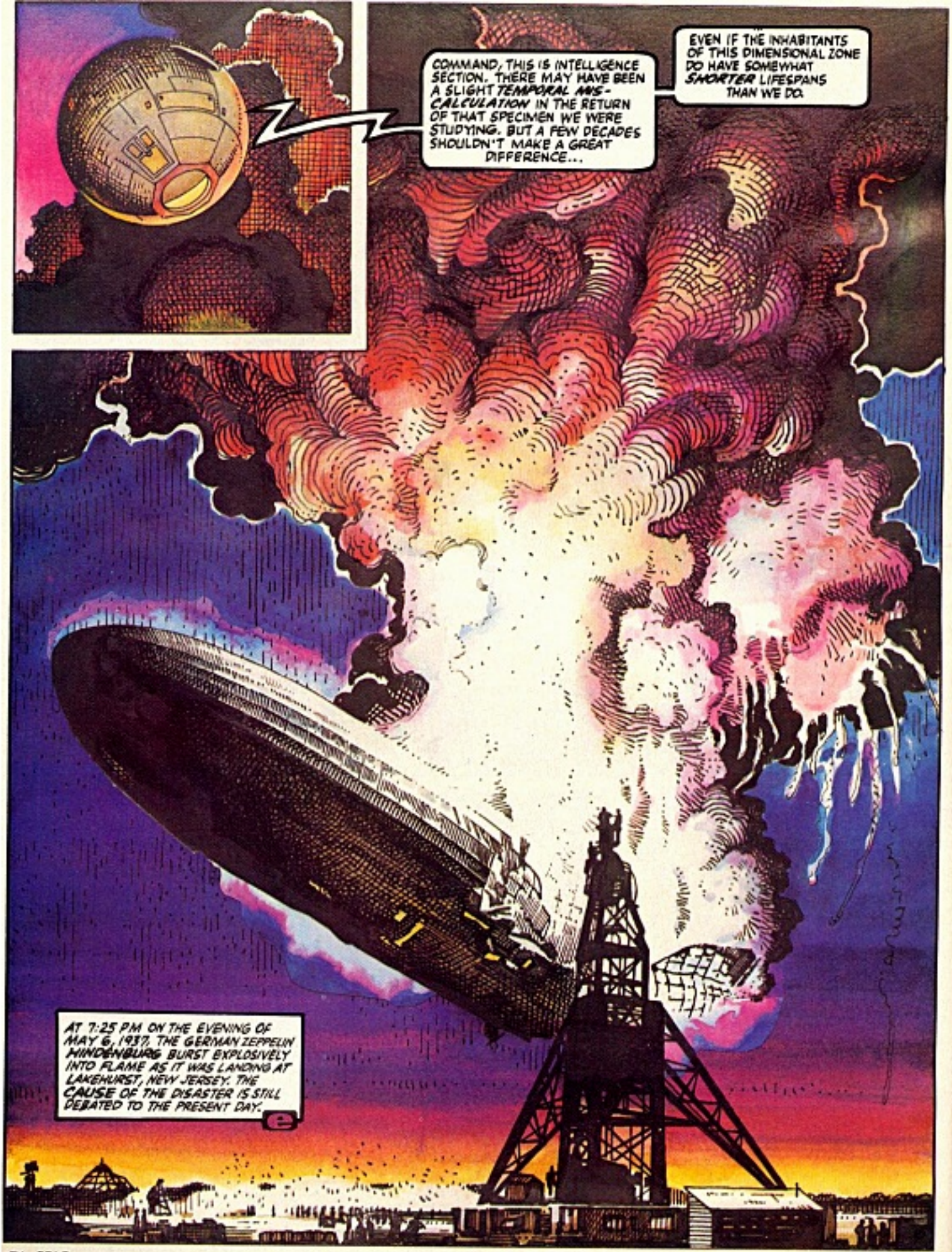
MAC, TRY TO RAISE BIG MAMA! TRY... ANYTHING!
BUT THE MAN IN THE BACK SEAT HAS BEEN TRYING. NOTHING HELPS. RED CROWN LEADER IS DRAWN STEADILY, INEVITABLY INTO VAST, ALMOST UNENDING BLACKNESS.


SKIPPER...! WHAT'S HAPPENING TO US...?!
IT IS A QUESTION WITH NO ANSWER. SOMEWHERE OFF THE COAST OF THE EASTERN UNITED STATES, THE ARMED PATROL OF LT. COMMANDER ROBBINS AND N.F.O. MacINNES BECOMES ANYTHING BUT ROUTINE.

HHHHUUUUMMRRRMM
KLONG

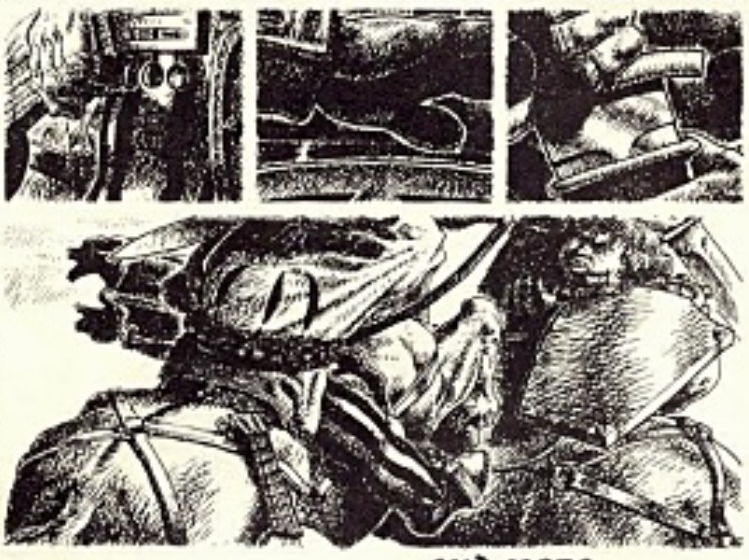

BACK ON BIG MAMA, ALL EYES STUDY THE RADAR DISPLAYS... RED CROWN ONE HAS VANISHED.
A FACT CONFIRMED BY THE SCOPES OF RED CROWN TWO AS IT MAKES ITS RETURN APPROACH.
MEANWHILE, DEEP IN NUMBING DARKNESS.
M-MAC...! I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON, BUT... I THINK I SEE...
D-DAYLIGHT, SKIPPER. WHATEVER GRABBED US IS LETTIN' US GO!
YEAH...! IT LOOKS THAT WAY. ALL SYSTEMS ARE RETURNING TO NORMAL. BUT WE CAN'T BE SURE, MAC.
ROBBINS TINGLES WITH A SENSE OF DISPLACEMENT. FEARFUL, READY FOR ANYTHING, HE ORDERS ALL WEAPON SYSTEMS ARMED AS THE END LOOMS NEARER AND NEARER, UNTIL...


RED CROWN LEADER SOARS FREE... INTO BRIGHT DAYLIGHT AND COMFORTABLY FAMILIAR SKIES.
SWIFTLY, MacINNES TAKES A READING...
WE'VE WANDERED, SKIPPER... BUT NOT TOO FAR. WE'RE OVER THE COAST OF NEW JERSEY. LET'S HEAD FOR--
?
THE MASSIVE SHAPE HEAVES OUT OF THE CLOUDS TOO SUDDENLY TO BE AVOIDED. AND, IN FIERY CHAOS, RED CROWN ONE FINISHES ITS PATROL.
ZZZZZZZiiiiiiiNNNNNNGGGGG


COMMAND, THIS IS INTELLIGENCE SECTION. THERE MAY HAVE BEEN A SLIGHT *TEMPORAL MIS-CALCULATION* IN THE RETURN OF THAT SPECIMEN WE WERE STUDYING. BUT A FEW DECADES SHOULDN'T MAKE A GREAT DIFFERENCE...
EVEN IF THE INHABITANTS OF THIS DIMENSIONAL ZONE DO HAVE SOMEWHAT *SHORTER* LIFESPANS THAN WE DO.
AT 7:25 PM ON THE EVENING OF MAY 6, 1937, THE GERMAN ZEPPELIN *HINDENBURG* BURST EXPLOSIVELY INTO FLAME AS IT WAS LANDING AT LAKEHURST, NEW JERSEY. THE *CAUSE* OF THE DISASTER IS STILL DEBATED TO THE PRESENT DAY.

FAIRY TALE

By Mirko Ilić



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YOUNG JACK CALLED HIMSELF A JEWELER...
YOU MAY ENTER!
...FOR HE MADE HIS LIVING BY THE THEFT AND RESALE OF PRECIOUS STONES.
THERE WAS ONLY ONE THING BESIDES GEMS AND GOLD COINS THAT JACK TRULY CARED ABOUT--
SHE AWAITS WITHIN...

JACK·TALES·

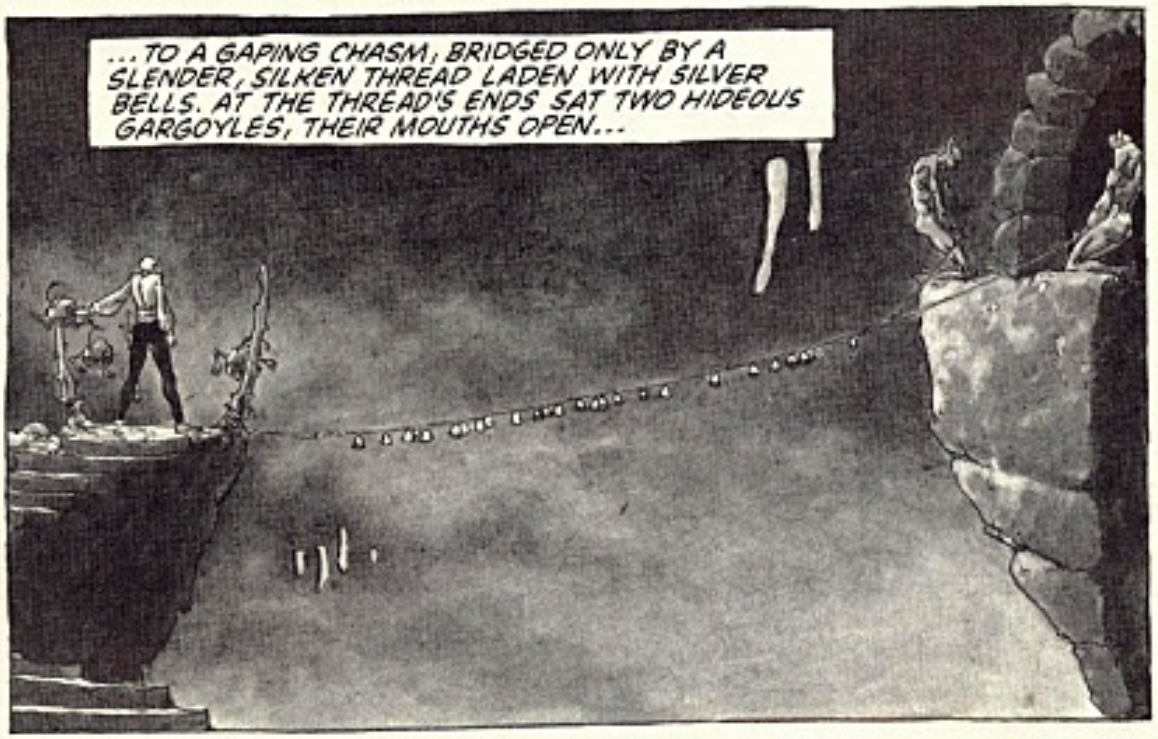
©C.VESS80

--THE PALE SKIN AND RUBY LIPS OF BEAUTIFUL WOMEN.
AND THE MOST BEAUTIFUL OF THEM ALL WAS THE LADY JANINE.
BUT JACK WAS AWARE THAT LATELY HER ATTENTION HAD BEGUN TO TURN AWAY FROM HIM.
IN ADDITION TO THE OTHER THINGS THEY HAD IN COMMON, LADY JANINE SHARED JACK'S PASSION FOR GOLD AND GEMSTONES.
MY LOVE!
AH, JACK... THESE LAST FEW NIGHTS, HOW I'VE LONGED FOR YOUR SWEET CARESSES. BUT FIRST, LET US... TALK.

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF THE GOLDEN CROWN THE BLACK PRIESTS OF SEIS MADE FOR THEIR GOD?
EVERYONE HAS HEARD OF THAT FABULOUS TREASURE, BUT NO ONE'S EVER SEEN IT, FOR IT'S VERY WELL GUARDED.
ONLY A FOOL WOULD RISK ANGERING THE BLACK PRIESTS BY TRYING TO STEAL IT!
I WANT THAT CROWN.
YOU COULD GET IT FOR ME... UNLESS ALL THE TALES YOU'VE TOLD ME OF YOUR PROWESS WERE JUST LIES TO SWEETEN MY FAVORS.
MY LADY, PLEASE, CAN'T WE--?
NO, JACK, WE CANNOT! I WILL NOT SHARE MY BED WITH A BRAGGART. MAYBE WHEN YOU'VE BROUGHT ME THE CROWN...
BECAUSE JACK WANTED TO PLEASE LADY JANINE -- AND BECAUSE HE CRAVED ADVENTURE -- HE AND HIS THREE ROBOT COMPANIONS SET OUT FOR THE CRUMBLING CITADEL OF THE BLACK PRIESTS...

THE ONLY VISIBLE ENTRANCE WAS A LONG WINDING STAIRCASE...

... WHICH WINDED EVER UPWARD...


...TO A GAPING CHASM, BRIDGED ONLY BY A SLENDER, SILKEN THREAD LADEN WITH SILVER BELLS. AT THE THREAD'S ENDS SAT TWO HIDEOUS GARGOYLES, THEIR MOUTHS OPEN...

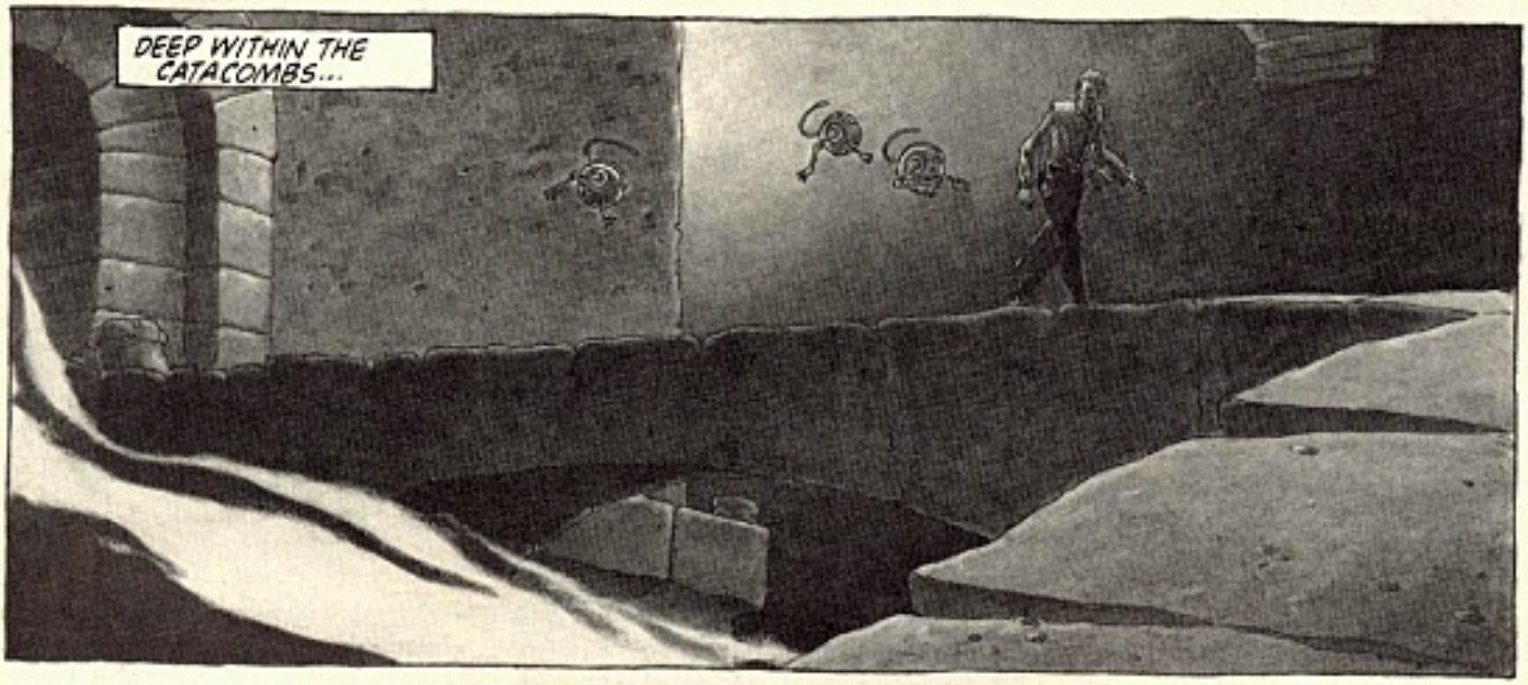
... AS IF, AT THE SLIGHTEST SOUND, THEY WOULD BELLOW AN ALARM.

BUT JACK MOVED SO LIGHTLY...

...THAT NOT A BELL CHIMED!

WELL, LITTLE ONES, THERE DON'T SEEM TO BE ANY GUARDS, OR ANY SPELLS TO PROTECT THESE DOORS. PERHAPS THE BLACK PRIESTS ARE ONLY A MYTH, AFTER ALL...

JACK DID NOT KNOW THAT HIS PROGRESS HAD BEEN WATCHED FOR DAYS.
THE THIEF HAS REACHED OUR SANCTUM AT LAST!
WHEN HE ARRIVES, WE MUST REWARD HIM RICHLY-- AS HE DESERVES.


DEEP WITHIN THE CATACOMBS...

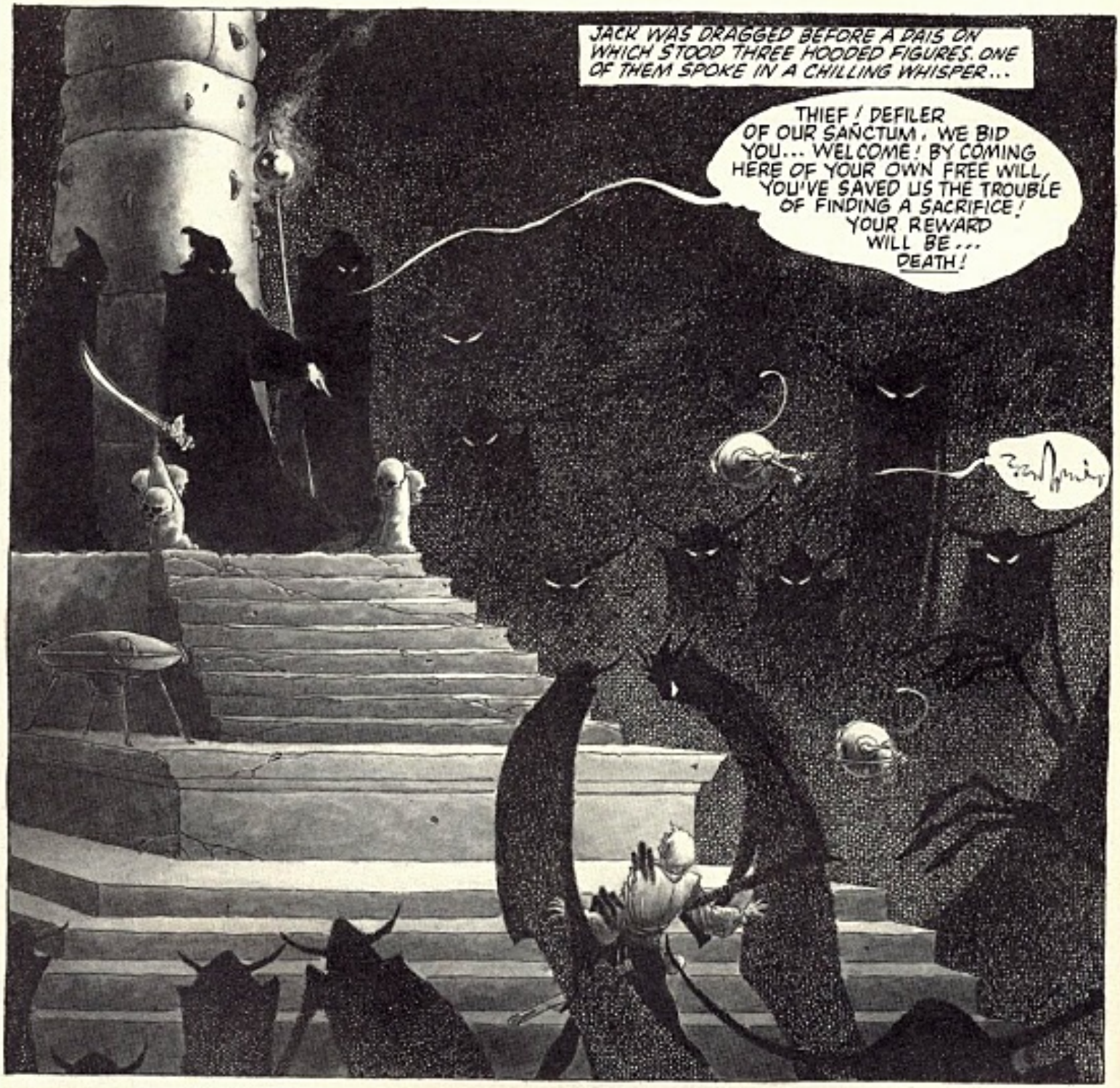
A FIGURE SUDDENLY TOOK SHAPE IN THE DARKNESS!
WELCOME TO THE COURT OF SHADOWS!

JACK'S SWORD SWIFTLY SLID FROM ITS SHEATH, AND GLITTERED...

...THROUGH THE AIR!

NOTHING BUT AN EMPTY CLOAK!

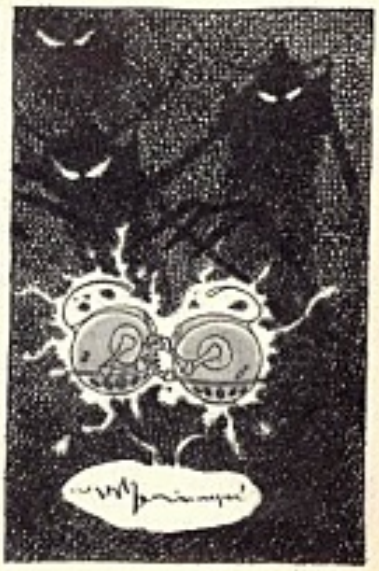
YES, I CAN FEEL IT, TOO! THE DANGER HERE IS NOT YET PAST!
SUDDENLY, THE DARKNESS IN THE CHAMBER SPRANG TO LIFE!
SKREEE!
BRING THE YOUNG FOOL TO ME!


JACK WAS DRAGGED BEFORE A DAIS ON WHICH STOOD THREE HOODED FIGURES. ONE OF THEM SPOKE IN A CHILLING WHISPER...
THIEF! DEFILER OF OUR SANCTUM. WE BID YOU... WELCOME! BY COMING HERE OF YOUR OWN FREE WILL, YOU'VE SAVED US THE TROUBLE OF FINDING A SACRIFICE! YOUR REWARD WILL BE... DEATH!

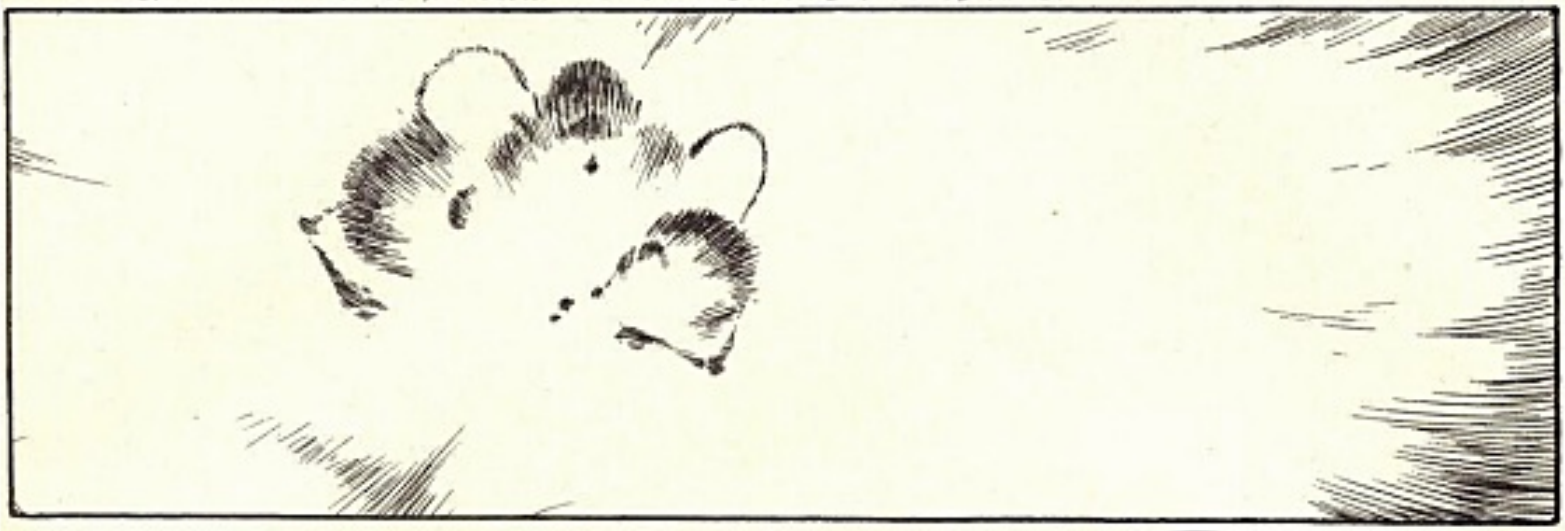
SOMEBODY STOP THOSE ROBOTS!

YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO!

QUICKLY! DESTROY THEM!



FROM THE TWO ROBOTS CAME ONE BURST OF PURE, SEARING WHITE LIGHT. IT FILLED THE CHAMBER, LEAVING NO SHADOW IN WHICH THE SERVANTS OF THE BLACK GOD COULD HIDE!



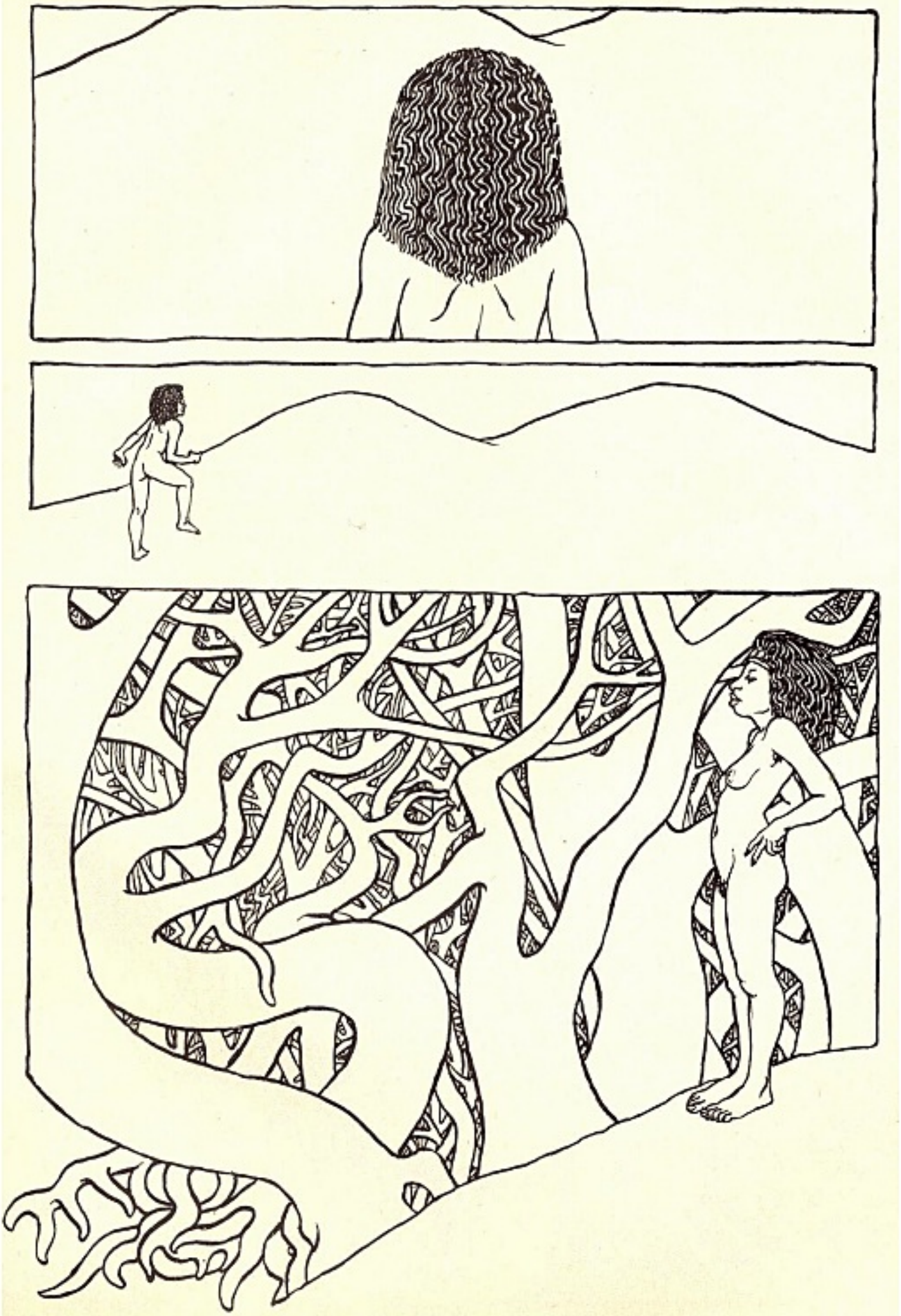
DON'T WORRY. WITH THE DARKNESS DISPERSED, THEY CAN'T TAKE SHAPE AGAIN. OH, MY FRIENDS, IF ONLY WE COULD HAVE SUCCEEDED BEFORE ONE OF YOU WAS LOST...

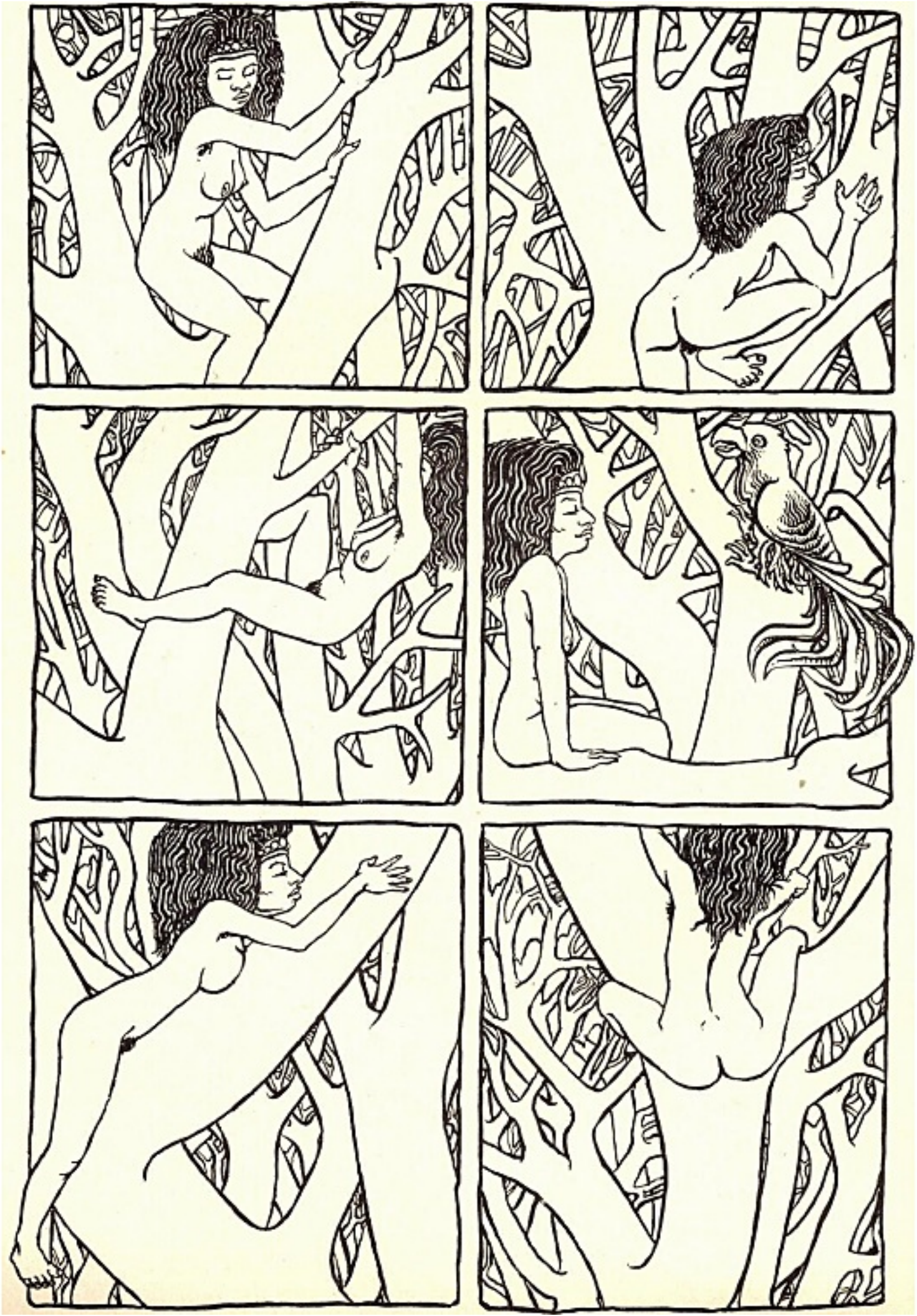
AND THEN JACK SAW IT.
SO THAT'S THE BLACK GOD'S CROWN. WELL, UNLESS THE REST OF LADY JANINE GROWS TO MATCH HER GREED, I FEAR IT WILL NEVER FIT HER.
COME, LITTLE ONES, LET US BE AWAY FROM THIS PLACE OF DARKNESS!
YES, YOU'RE RIGHT. MY PURSE IS EMPTY, BUT JUST THE OTHER DAY I SAW A...

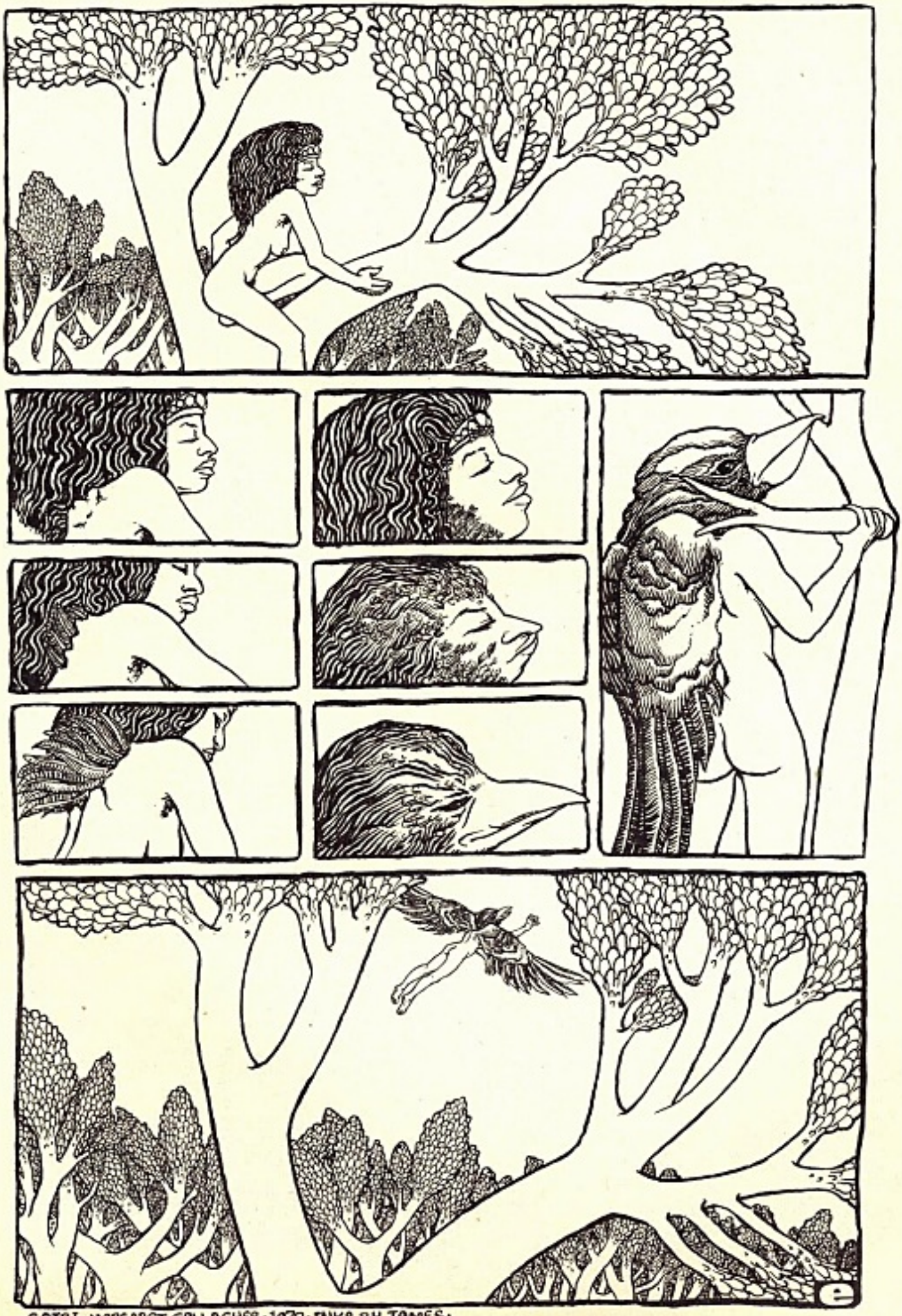
·A SPECIAL THANKS TO R. RECTOR·

·END

Satri
Flowers.



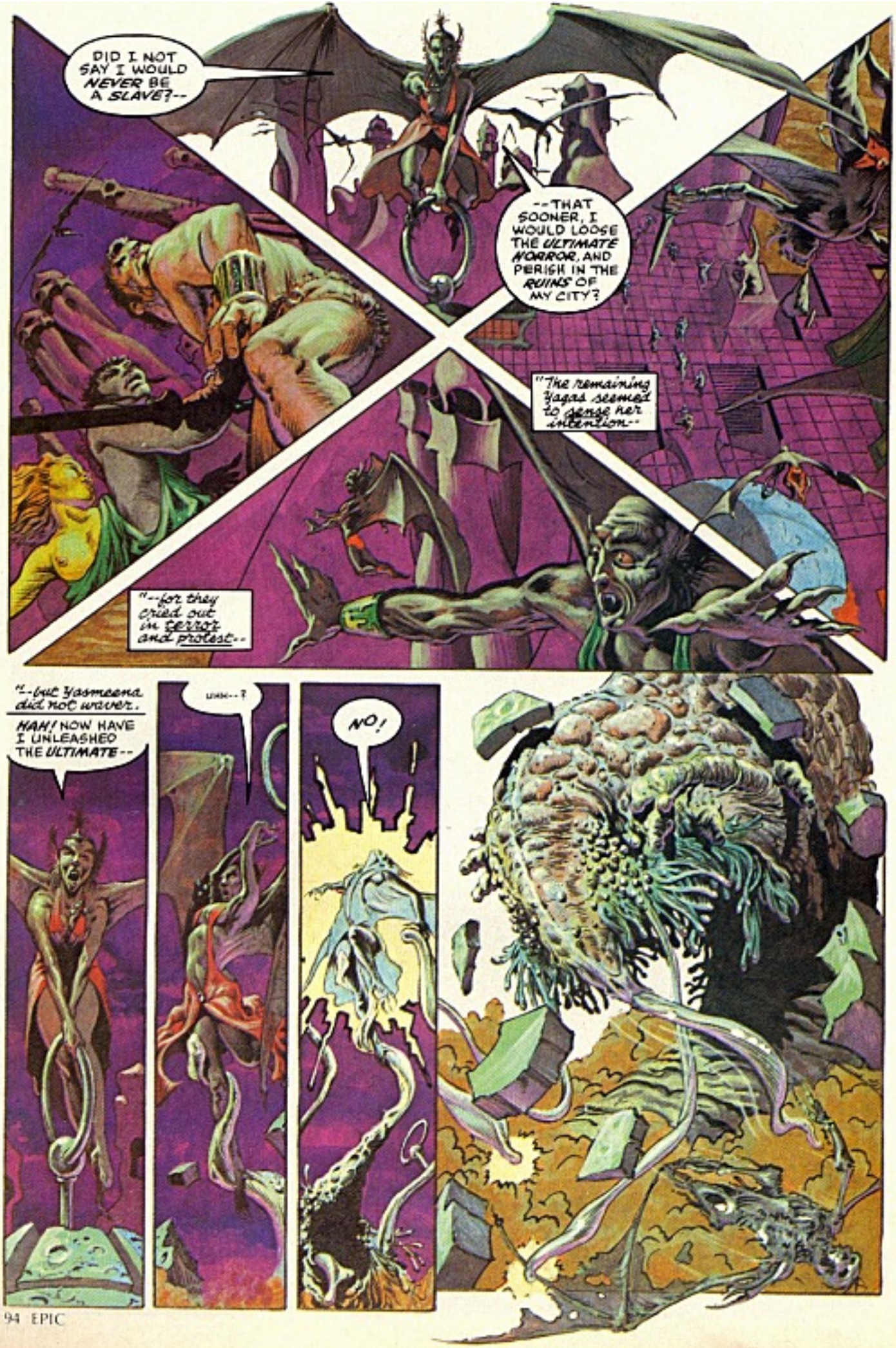



·SATRI· MARGARET GALLAGHER·1970·INKS BY JAMES·

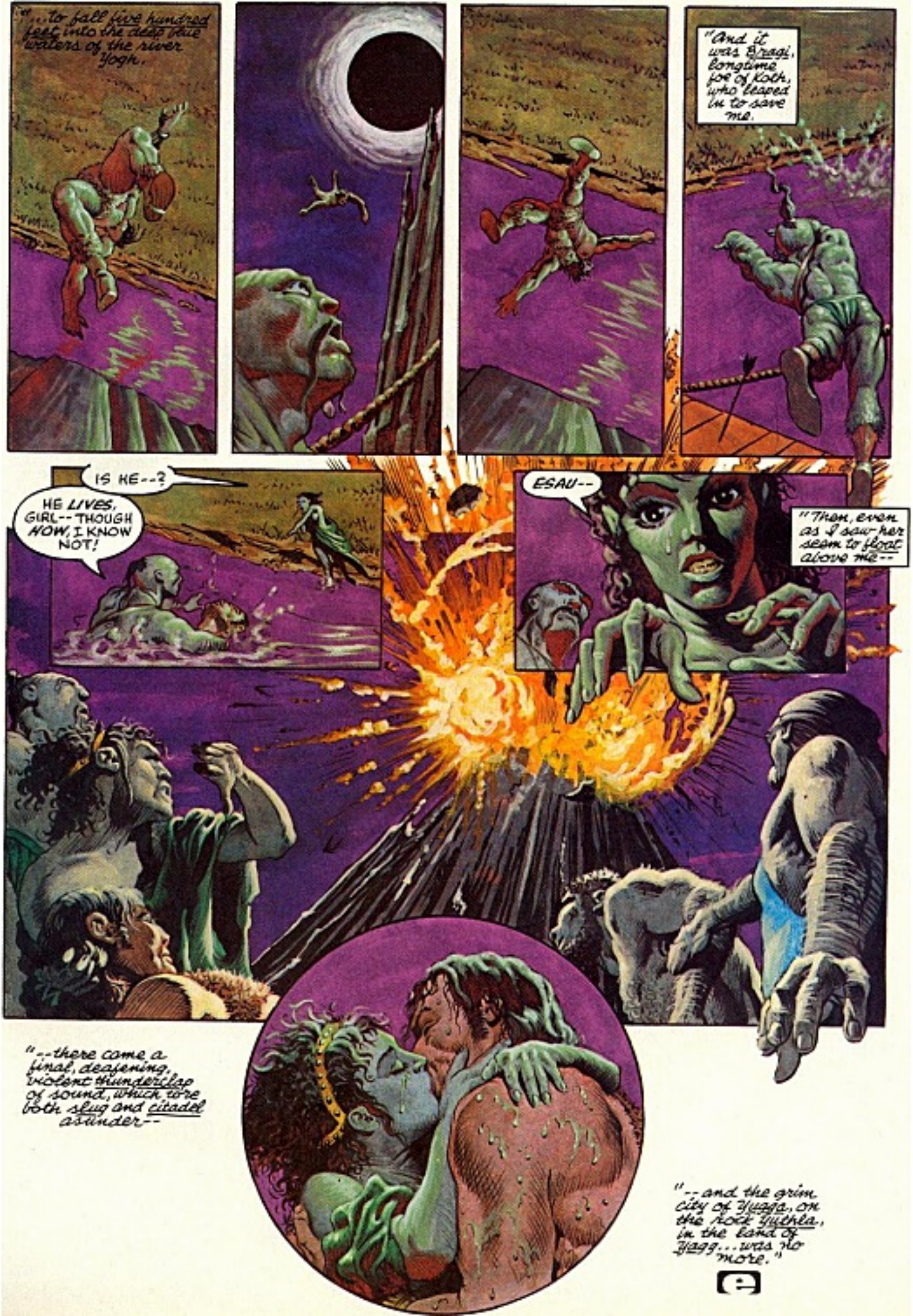
"Brandishing Zotrah's dagger, I leaped into the fray...
"...which had now become carnage...
"...as death rained from above.
"Then, abruptly, a blue face loomed before me...
YOU--AKKA! I WANT YOUR SWORD!
NO! I SERVE THE MASTERS!
YOU'LL SERVE THEM IN HELL, WHEN I--
"I had spoken more truly than I knew...
"But I had my sword.
"And so I made straight for the temple of Yamneena.

"I knew the warriors of Koh would follow, when they could...
"But, they had their hands full, at the moment...
"...so I would do the best I could... alone.
"Then it was that I heard a familiar, hated voice...
EAT, YAGAS! LET THE OTHERS TAKE CARE OF THOSE APE-THINGS.
"I knew I should have stayed hidden, biding for time — but my pounding ears would not let me...
WHERE IS ALTHA, YASMEENA?
YOU!?
I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN--!
"And once again, I laughed that hoop-dustful laugh Yasmeena had hated...
"...as I stepped forward to die fighting.
WE STRIKE WITH ESAU IRONHAND!
"Then, suddenly... the men of Abnigir were there, foaming like rabid dogs to come face to face with their long-despised foes!

"But the embrace of the ebon devils did not stop.
COME BACK, YASMEENA!
I WANT YOU, MY QUEEN!
"And for my part, it was not really Yasmeena I sought...
"...but the chamber where were imprisoned the Virgins of the Moon.
"My heart beat not, as I entered...
ALTHA...?
"Then... she was there.
OH, ESAU -- ESAU!
I'VE COME TO TAKE YOU HOME, BELOVED.
"Yet, as we all fled...
"...the demoness called from above:
DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE CONQUERED, O FOOL?
YOU HAVE NOT!


DID I NOT SAY I WOULD NEVER BE A SLAVE?--
--THAT SOONER, I WOULD LOOSE THE ULTIMATE HORROR, AND PERISH IN THE RUINS OF MY CITY?
"The remaining Yagas seemed to avenge her intention--
"--for they cried out in terror and protest--
"--but Yasmeena did not waver.
HAH! NOW HAVE I UNLEASHED THE ULTIMATE--
UHH--?
NO!

"The thing that had emerged into the light of dawn was brainless, sightless...a senseless fury of death and destruction...
GHOR! TAKE THE WOMEN BACK THROUGH THE SHAFT!
WHAT OF YOU, IRONHAND?
JUST GO, DAMN YOU!
"What I expected to accomplish, I do not know, even now...
"Yet, in the middle of its vast body I had seen a dark spot pulsing...
"...a dark spot I felt must be the center of the being's life.
"Aye... must be.
"and so, I sprang upon it like a wounded tiger!
"They say that, the instant my sword sank into the fire-slug, both it and I were enveloped in a blinding flame--
"--and my body was hurled, far out over the cliff..."


"...to fall five hundred feet into the deep blue waters of the river Yogh.
"And it was Bragi, longtime foe of Koth, who leaped in to save me.
IS HE--?
HE LIVES, GIRL--THOUGH HOW, I KNOW NOT!
ESAU--
"Then, even as I saw her seem to float above me--
"--there come a final, deafening, violent thunderclap of sound, which tore both slug and citadel asunder--
"--and the grim city of Yuggs, on the rock Yuthla, in the land of Yagg...was no more."